TO RULE IN A TURBULENT WORLD VOL.3

乱世为王

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Via Lactea Ltd.

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[Chapter 31]

The winter night sky brimmed with stars; so brilliant that it felt surreal. Yet despite the celestial beauty above, the wind cut like knives, and the faint howling in the distance sent shivers down one's spine.

You Miao was both freezing and starving. The misery of exhaustion was making his head swim, and he was burning up with a light fever. His dreams were fragmented and broken. There were images of Li Zhifeng, and then there were images of the golden chariots and iron steeds of the capital. He didn't know where the Tartars were taking them; whenever they woke, they were dragged onward to march like dogs, stopping only at night. The prisoners had to urinate in their own pants and huddle in the frozen snow, seeking warmth from each other.

"Where are they taking us?" a youth asked.

"Da'an," answered a middle-aged official. His hands were bound, and his hair unbound. "I've traveled this path before. After we pass Lan Pass, it'll be Da'an. There's a good half a month's road ahead."

You Miao recognized the man; he was named Lin. He was the Vice Minister of Personnel, and was an honest and upright official.

"What'll happen once we reach Da'an?" You Miao asked.

Vice Minister Lin sighed, and another youth answered in his stead in a hushed voice. "Killing us doesn't serve to benefit the Tartars. My guess is that they'll lock us up and write to our families to have us ransomed."

"But everyone in my family is dead," Qin Shaonan said. "They won't get any money."

"You don't know that," You Miao tried to console him. "Maybe they're still alive?"

"I saw my dad die with my own eyes," Qin Shaonan said.

Everyone fell silent.

It was Vice Minister Lin who spoke up in the end. “Let’s not dwell on this. Even if the Tartars took over the capital, it won’t matter. They’re nomads. All they want is money, so they won’t kill us. Let’s take it one step at a time for our remaining days.”

“If His Majesty is no more…” another person spoke up. “What do we do?”

No one dared to respond to that, and they all turned their eyes to Zhao Chao. He hadn’t spoken a single word on the road; he was almost insidiously quiet. When he spoke up now, it was with a rhetorical question.

“There are still Hans in Jiangnan. The six prefectures of Jiangnan, Jiaozhi, Liyang…do you take their armies for dead? No matter how powerful the Tartars are, they won’t dare cross the Yangtze so rashly.”

The rest of the crowd immediately felt reassured by his words.

“Your Highness, did anyone from the royal family escape the capital?” Vice Minister Lin asked.

Zhao Chao made a nasal noise of affirmation, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. All the scholars felt that as long as the Zhao Family was still alive, Tianqi would not fall.

You Miao further reassured the group. “My teacher Sun Yu is in Liu Prefecture. He will personally take command of the army.”

The youths all nodded. At a time like this, Sun Yu would indeed go to war. When You Miao thought of how he had first left Jiangnan to attend the exams, only to end up falling so hard from grace that he’d needed Sun Yu to come rescue him, he felt miserably ashamed. He couldn’t help but shake his head, chuckling to himself wryly.

Gradually, the voices began to die down. Head throbbing, You Miao buried his head in his knees as a bit of snow fluttered past, landing by his ears. The tickling of the soft snow made You Miao look up, and he saw Zhao Chao beckoning him from where he sat, two people away. You Miao answered by attempting to shuffle over to huddle with him. The two men

who were bound between him and Zhao Chao were almost at their end, and they lay in the snow at the brink of death.

"Hang in there," Zhao Chao whispered, feeling You Miao's forehead.

You Miao closed his eyes and nodded.

"What are you thinking about?" Zhao Chao asked in a hushed whisper.

You Miao smiled. "Thinking about who at home's gonna pay for my ransom."

He certainly spoke the truth. What Vice Minister Lin had said made You Miao think of Qiao Jue, Li Zhifeng, and his father You Dechuan, all of whom were in Jiangnan. You Miao couldn't be sure if You Dechuan would cough up the cash, but Qiao Jue definitely would. If they learned of his whereabouts, it would probably be Li Zhifeng who'd come to pay the money anyway. He was a Quanrong, and that'd make negotiations easier. Moreover, once he saw the capital had fallen, he would definitely think of a way to rescue You Miao.

"Ask who?" Zhao Chao rebuked; his voice hushed. "At a time like this, who'd you ask to save you? It's no use asking anyone; everyone we can rely on is dead. Even the country itself has been conquered. If the Tartars charge past the Yangtze, who can you count on to save you? You Ziqian! We have to think of a way to save ourselves!"

You Miao's breath hitched. Zhao Chao's words had jolted You Miao awake.

Zhao Chao continued, "Look at the stars in the sky. Look."

You Miao obediently raised his head. In that moment, the frigid winds of the distant snowy land gently ceased their torment of the prisoners at last. The night sky was teeming with stars, twinkling and shimmering at the end of the heavens.

“We are heading north,” Zhao Chao said. “The probable destination is the City of Da’an. Da’an had already fallen into the hands of Tartars before the Five Barbarian Tribes entered the central plains.”

“Right. I remember autumn’s military reports mentioning that place,” You Miao replied.

Da’an was the place where the Barbarians conducted trade. The Tartars weren’t part of the Five Barbarian Tribes, but they had formed an alliance with them.

“Can we escape?” You Miao asked.

“Not here…” Zhao Chao said. “If we make our escape here, we’ve got no food or drink. And no matter how quickly we move, we can’t outrun horses; if they catch us, it’s certain death. Besides, with so many people, we won’t be able to run that fast.”

“Right.”

You Miao understood now. Zhao Chao had awakened his will to fight, and he drew a map of the surrounding area with his finger in the snow.

“We can’t wait till we reach Da’an, either. There’ll be no opportunities there. The best time to take action would be right before Lan Pass.”

“Mn,” Zhao Chao agreed. “There’s a number of small villages before Lan Pass. I’m guessing they’ll pick one of them as a rest stop. We’ll move then; steal the horses when the Tartars are sleeping. Have you noticed their steeds?”

“Yes,” You Miao said. “They’re all warhorses from our side.”

“I knew they were captured beasts the moment I saw them,” Zhao Chao said. “They’re all rookie steeds, too. When the time comes, steal the horses and run. The Tartars won’t be able to call them back… Run along the foot of the mountain and we’ll be able to find the official highway.”

You Miao's heart was racing, and he nodded. "Okay, right, we can go down to Jiangnan via the official highway."

Zhao Chao lowered himself next to his ear and said, "Let's hope. If we're lucky, maybe we'll run into the Due Diligence Army. None of us have the energy anymore; this is our last chance. Run for as far as we can…"

You Miao creased his brows. "How will we coordinate with the others?"

"No need to," Zhao Chao said. "Don't tell them. Aside from the fact that the Tartars might sense something's going on, if everything is planned ahead, there'll definitely be people who'd freeze when the time comes, and that'll ruin things."

It took a second for You Miao to understand what Zhao Chao was thinking. Say nothing now, and when the time came, let the prisoners run wild. They would surely be galvanized with explosive power.

Zhao Chao and You Miao talked and put together a careful plan, then broke off and pretended as though nothing was the matter. At the corner of his eyes, You Miao noticed that Zhao Chao had gone to talk to Zhang Wenhan. From Zhang Wenhan's slow nod, You Miao could tell he had joined the plan. They exchanged a knowing look.

The next day, the day had only just broken and the group were pulled onto the road once more. For five consecutive days, they were fed only a tragically small bit of dough bread, and many died on the road. The Tartars tossed their corpses out into the snowy fields. A wolf discovered one of the bodies, which led to a pack of wolves following behind the marching band in the snow. They didn't dare come close, for fear of the Tartars' arrows, but they trailed not far behind and rushed forward whenever a corpse was thrown out to tear it apart.

"Lord Zheng!" someone shouted from the back. "People up front, do us a favor! Walk slower! Lord Zheng is collapsing!"

You Miao recognized the middle-aged man at the end the line. He was someone from the censorate, an official who was used to living in prestige and luxury and had never before suffered such torture. By the time they reached Lan Pass, with a body frozen blue and purple and shivering nonstop, he had finally succumbed and was unable to walk a step further. One of the Tartars ahead yelled something and came over. He whipped the man, but Censor Zheng only lay sprawled on the snow, unmoving.

"I'll carry him!" a young man exclaimed. "Don't throw him away!"

The Tartar cursed something vulgar and whipped the young man too, then he threw Censor Zheng out into the snow before dragging the captives away. The snow wolves waited until the people were far gone before they rushed in. When Censor Zheng regained consciousness, he was already surrounded by the pack. A sharp wail escaped from his throat, but he was soon torn to pieces by the wolves, his blood dying the snow red.

The scream came to an abrupt stop; the wolves had probably bitten through his throat. You Miao shut his eyes, unable to stop his shaking as he followed the Tartar troop into Lan Pass.

The village next to Lan Pass was already ravaged by the flames of war, and all that was left were its ashen remnants. Snow was falling harder now, the storm bellowing at the checkpoint. This area was the wind gap for the north road, and every year when merchant caravans came through, they always had to pray for good weather. Otherwise, half a mountain could be buried should there be heavy snowfall. You Miao remembered that he had also came here once with the caravan, many years ago.

The captives were thrown into an abandoned house in the village, while the Tartar soldiers, swearing loudly, ducked into a wooden cottage that was still in perfect shape. They left one man behind to guard the night. You Miao was almost paralyzed by the cold; the frigid wind blowing through the cracks of this rundown house was practically chopping off his ears.

Qinling shrouded, my home concealed from view,

Lan Pass snowbound, the horses' path they eschew. [1].

You Miao persisted in staying conscious until halfway through the night, when the Tartar night watch was dozing. Zhao Chao shot You Miao a look and then made a hand gesture. You Miao was seized by worry, his heart pounding wildly in his chest, unsure of whether he was up for the task. Eyes unfocused, he saw nothing but a blur.

He recalled that year beyond the border, when he and Zhao Chao were captured and locked up. At the time, the two of them had exerted a great deal of effort just to kill one Tartar. Had it not been for the subsequent rescuers, they would've died a violent death. Now, they had ten whole muscular Tartar soldiers. And other than himself and Zhao Chao, the rest of their group consisted of weak scholars. Moreover, they hadn't eaten for nearly six days and were barely hanging on with just a bit of dough bread.

Zhao Chao crawled over, cut through the ropes binding You Miao's wrists, and stuffed the dagger into his hands. It was the dagger You Miao had given him the day they parted; the one Li Yan had gifted to You Miao for self-defense when he left the capital four years ago.

Dropping to a low voice, Zhao Chao said to him, "Don't be scared. If anything, we'll die together."

You Miao swallowed, then nodded. The hand gripping the dagger was shaking. Zhao Chao had already returned to his spot, and he gave Zhang Wenhan a shove.

"Move over, don't steal my spot," Zhao Chao griped.

Zhang Wenhan grumbled something and shuffled a bit. But he was incensed when Zhao Chao kicked him, and he blocked his leg with his elbow, shouting, "What are you doing?!"

"Get the hell out," Zhao Chao spat.

Now jostling with Zhao Chao, Zhang Wenhan exclaimed furiously, "Your Highness, what's wrong with you?!"

Such a commotion had roused everyone, but having been starved for so many days, none of them could muster much strength to stop their fight. They could only weakly mutter.

"Don't fight…don't…"

"Your Highness…please just let him go…"

Zhao Chao was relentless, however, and continued kicking Zhang Wenhan. Also outraged, Zhang Wenhan kicked out in retaliation when his head hit the wall. The sudden loud noise of the commotion quickly brought over the night watch soldier, who came wielding a whip. He raised it high, ready to strike, when Zhao Chao and Zhang Wenhan both stopped and lunged at him at the same time!

You Miao stood up, but at the first step, a wave of dizziness washed over him and nearly made him buckle. Nonetheless, he staggered forward and tackled the soldier, whose back was facing him, and Zhao Chao used this chance to lock his arms around the soldier's neck in a chokehold. Stunned, the soldier tried to yell, but he was immediately quelled when Zhang Wenhan shoved his entire fist into his mouth.

"Quick…" Zhao Chao gritted out.

You Miao pulled out his dagger, his body moving faster than his mind, and slashed the soldier's throat. The blade cracked the spine bone as it carved through nearly half of the neck. An odd gurgling noise escaped from the cavity as blood gushed forth, splashing all three of them.

Zhang Wenhan grunted and pulled out his hand before slumping to the ground, holding his fingers protectively and convulsing in pain.

White noise filled You Miao's head as he scanned the room. Everyone was frozen in shock. Someone opened their mouth, about to shout, but Zhao Chao frantically gestured for them to remain silent.

"Don't anyone speak," Zhao Chao warned.

"Your Highness…save me," the boy Ji Guang said as he teared up.

You Miao went to him at once and covered his mouth, signaling him to not make a sound.

“Wenhan,” Zhao Chao called. “Are you all right?”

Zhang Wenhan gave a painful nod. You Miao let go of Ji Guang, going over to Zhang Wenhan to check on him.

“My fingers…are broken,” Zhang Wenhan said. “Bandage…”

You Miao bandaged Zhang Wenhan, his heart still pounding. Zhao Chao went to the fallen soldier and removed his armor, putting it on himself.

“Change of guard is about to take place. Get ready and don’t make a sound. Success or failure rides on this attempt,” he said.

You Miao further instructed as he cut the rope off of everyone’s wrists, “In a bit, after the next guard is killed, His Highness and I will go out to steal horses. Two people to a horse. You all know how to ride, right? Those who can ride, take those who can’t, and follow the mountain range past Lan Pass. After reaching the official highway, leave a mark whenever you come across a village. If the escape is a success, we will meet at Zheng Liang Pass.”

The group stirred quietly as they rose to their feet, but they were unsteady with no strength in their legs.

Qin Shaonan said, “Let’s go together, Ziqian!”

“It’s gonna be chaos as soon as we start running!” You Miao said. “Shaonan, take Ji Guang with you! Do your best to lead the group, don’t be scared! Dying on the road is still better than dying at the hands of Tartars!”

Qin Shaonan responded with a hard nod.

Someone else asked, “Are there enough horses?”

You Miao and Zhao Chao exchanged a look.

“There are enough, so get ready,” Zhao Chao said. “Sit back down, everyone, and don’t talk. Don’t yell, either!”

Zhao Chao was wearing the full-body leather armor of the dead Tartar, but he was a size smaller. He went to lay down by the campfire where the Tartar had been sitting, making sure to show a bit of the helmet over the window. You Miao, meanwhile, hid in the shadows behind the campfire.

It didn’t take long before another Tartar soldier came over. He shouted something vulgar and laughed, but Zhao Chao simply snored, sprawled unmoving on the ground with his face down. In the instant that the Tartar tried to flip him over, Zhao Chao leapt up, locked his arms around his neck in a deadly chokehold, and shoved a flaming fire log down his throat!

The Tartar screamed, but his cries were muffled, and You Miao immediately stabbed through the back of his head with the dagger. Blood spilled once more, and it splashed across his face. The soldier buckled and slumped to the ground.

The prisoners all began to move. Zhao Chao and You Miao each picked up a burning fire log.

You Miao motioned to the group. “Quick! Don’t make a sound and follow us!”

The group staggered to catch up with You Miao while Zhao Chao went off on his own, tossing the burning logs outside the cottage where the rest of the Tartars were sleeping. Catching the wind, the fire pranced erratically as it spread.

You Miao led the group to the stable. “Hurry! Get on the horses!”

With their lives at stake, a burst of strength erupted within everyone. Even those who didn’t know how to ride pushed with all they had to hop onto the horses. Once everyone had mounted, You Miao unfastened the reins.

“Run! Run, now!”

The first horse whinnied and dashed out of the stable, into the vast snowstorm! The commotion instantly alerted the Tartar soldiers, yet before they could investigate, the cottage they were in caught fire. They yelled and shouted in confusion as they ran out of the house. It was mayhem.

When You Miao mounted his own horse, a wave of light-headedness washed over him. He shook it off when Zhao Chao charged over.

"Onto the horse—!" Zhao Chao roared.

The blazing fire shocked the warhorse, and as soon as You Miao pulled Zhao Chao onto the horse, it dashed out of the abandoned village, taking them into the absolute darkness of the night as the Tartars' voices were left far behind them. Yet it didn't take long before clopping hooves sounded in their wake. An official had been shot dead and his stolen horse was taken by a pursuer. The Tartars were catching up!

" *Hiyah* —!" Zhao Chao spurred the horse on.

Neither he nor You Miao had bows or arrows; all they had was a dagger for self-defense. If You Miao had the former, then they could've definitely taken care of the pursuers with Zhao Chao riding and You Miao shooting. It was a nice thought, but You Miao's only option right now was to stab the horse's rump with his dagger. The sudden flare of pain made the horse whinny and begin to charge like mad.

"Watch out!" An arrow whistled past their ears, and You Miao yelled, "Lean down!"

The two lay low on the horse as more and more arrows shot in their direction. You Miao's head was spinning, but just as he was about to sit up, his pupils contracted. He reached out and hugged Zhao Chao, who was turning his head, around the neck, and raised his shoulder to shield his throat. An arrow pierced You Miao's left shoulder and he fell off the horse, crashing into the snow.

"You Miao—!" Zhao Chao cried out. He was about to jump off the horse, but his foot got caught in the stirrup. The warhorse was still in a

panic from its rump injury, so it continued to run in a frenzy, completely out of control. In an instant, the fallen You Miao was deserted far behind.

You Miao tumbled a few times in the snow after his fall. When he stilled at last, he caught a glimpse of the twinkling starry night sky before the view soon changed to the cloud of snow he'd stirred. The Tartars quickly caught up to him and one charged their horse to deliver a kick. The impact of the hooves sent him flying, blood spewing from his mouth.

After that, his sight went black and he lost consciousness.

[Text Break]

It was a sharp pain that roused You Miao. He woke to sunlight blinding him and angry shouting voices all around.

He was thrown to the icy ground with his mouth gagged, his arms twisted and bound behind his back, and his legs also securely trussed. There were several Tartar soldiers around; he squinted and spotted a commander. There were many Hans kneeling before this commander, and a few Tartar soldiers were anxiously answering his questions. One of those soldiers was then slapped.

The Tartar commander said something in a cold tone. A subordinate approached You Miao, strapped a rope tightly around his neck, and hung him up.

You Miao was already on the verge of death, and almost gasped his last breath. His sight was sometimes clear, sometimes blurry. He felt warm and temperate, like he was soaking in hot water, and a light shone before his eyes. It was almost as if the mother who'd left him when he was little was standing in that field of light, waiting to take him away.

"Please, oh Great King…please…" Li Yan's voice sounded from the distance.

I'm about to die , You Miao thought as he lost consciousness once more.

Just then, a man rushed over from the drill grounds of Yanbian. He stumbled and crawled before falling to his knees in front of the Tartar commander. He kowtowed nonstop, knocking his head soundly on the ground and loudly crying his desperate pleas.

"Oh Great King, please let him go! Please, oh Great King… Have mercy…"

The voice was distant, yet close. That light shone once again in the darkness of his mind. The rope hanging You Miao dead was suddenly cut, and he crashed back to solid ground. He turned his head and, like having a flash of lucidity before death, he clearly saw the scene before him.

He saw Li Yan prostrating before the commander, kowtowing like a pestle crushing garlic in a mortar. The blood on his forehead dyed a large tract of the snow. He saw the Emperor Zhao Zhuo and the Grand Emperor Zhao Mao also kneeling in front of the commander. Zhao Zhuo had turned his head to look at You Miao.

A day later, You Miao was once again roused to consciousness when a projectile hit him on the head. He had passed out three times at this point, and even he was surprised that he was able to wake yet again. How had he not died?

"You Miao," Li Yan whispered, calling from the outside. "Can you hear me?"

You Miao jolted. "Where are you? I hear you!" he replied weakly.

"Don't make a sound!" Li Yan said. "Can you move? This is the City of Da'an. I have a question for you. The day I left the city for the peace talk, did you all open the city gates and flee from the east gate?"

You Miao was instantly enraged. "I didn't! Would I still be here if I'd run away?"

"What about His Majesty?" Li Yan questioned. "I was fucking detained in an enemy camp, and they ran away by themselves?!"

Startled, You Miao began to recall the events of that night. How had the Tartars breached the city? Were the Emperors captured because they'd seen the situation turning for the worse and tried to run away?

"I don't know!" You Miao admitted. "By the time I woke up, the Tartars had already entered the city! I was captured afterward!"

Li Yan then questioned, "Did you kill Tartars on the way here, and release our people?"

"Yes!"

"Who escaped in the end? Is His Highness the Third Prince still alive?"

"I don't know…"

"But he escaped?"

"What exactly is going on? Answer me!" You Miao exclaimed.

"I don't have much time," Li Yan said. "I snuck over when the soldier guarding you got drunk. You must live on… I have to go!"

You Miao didn't manage to ask much before Li Yan hurried away. It was dark all around him, so You Miao figured he was locked up in some prison cell. Dragging his broken arm, he bent down and felt around, and found the thing Li Yan had thrown in earlier. It was a piece of dough bread.

He wolfed down the bread, choking on it so hard his eyes rolled back. This prison cell was so much better than that journey with its frigid winds—at least it wasn't so cold. Slowly, he began to recall the course of the events during his previous escape. Zhao Chao should have gotten away; he didn't have the time to check on anyone else. Vice Minister Lin had probably been shot dead.

As long as Zhao Chao could get back, at least the country wouldn't fall… But why had Li Yan shown up here? Had he been arrested and brought here from the start? If that was true, then the Tartar commander was most likely Hemetir.

He seemed to have seen Zhao Zhuo toward the end, before he lost consciousness, but he wasn't sure. You Miao unconsciously shuddered. *Don't let it be true… Please don't let it be true* , he thought.

" *When we first set off, the willows were fresh and green… When we now return, the snow falls heavy and bleak …* [2] " Resting against the walls of the prison cell, You Miao mumbled as he sang — except this time, he had no one beside him to sing along. Gradually, he fell asleep.

When sunlight shone into the cell the next day, someone opened the door, cussed something at him, and dragged him out by the hair. You Miao's hair was loose and disheveled, and his body was entirely covered in urine and Tartar blood. A foul odor emanated from him. He was dragged to an open area like a dead dog.

In the drill grounds next to the Da'an army camp, Zhao Zhuo, Zhao Mao, Li Yan, Ping Xi, and other officials from the six ministries had been rounded up. They were bound by ropes and tethered together, and all were in a sorry state. You Miao was shoved to the very back of the group to be tied up, and from the front row, the Minister of Personnel and the Minister of War turned their heads to look. The one lined up directly in front of You Miao was the Bangyan, Chen Qing. When they smelled the repulsive stench on You Miao's body, everyone groaned.

"Greetings, my lords." You Miao sneered and cupped his hands at them in salutation. "Greetings, Your Majesty."

Zhao Zhuo was lined in the second row, and he cocked his head at the greeting. But he only glanced at You Miao before turning away.

"How has Lord You come to be so unkempt?" Chen Qing asked in a whisper.

You Miao was shaking in anger. His lips twitched upward. "While you were all running away, I was guarding the city. Of course I am unkempt."

It was obvious to You Miao now: the people before him were those who'd ran off in a panic on the night the capital was breached. At the time,

Li Yan was still conducting negotiations in the enemy camp; if these bastards hadn't attempted to flee, maybe nothing would've happened. They were discovered by the Tartars as soon as they left the city, and a small unit of soldiers were sent to pursue them while the main force of the army invaded the city.

As for Zhao Chao, the moment he discovered that Zhao Zhuo was going to run that night, he sent an urgent squad to escort You Miao out of the city. But the Tartars had come too fast, and had almost wiped everyone out. The Tartars who captured You Miao and Zhao Chao were members of one squad, while the ones who seized Zhao Zhuo and Zhao Mao were another troop belonging to the main force.

And now, the group that had been brought to Da'an consisted of nearly the entire imperial court, including almost every member of the royal family… Speaking of which, why were the Empress and the Grand Empress nowhere to be seen? You Miao shuddered, not daring to dwell on the thought. He watched, helpless, as the Tartar commander approached and took the head seat at the center of the drill ground.

And then, the group of captives began to move.

With the Grand Emperor Zhao Mao taking the lead, everyone walked up to the commander, one by one. Zhao Mao was the first to approach, and he conducted the grandest salutation: bending his knees, prostrating, and kowtowing.

"Wishing the Great General a good morning. Pray the General enjoys infinite good health," he said.

The commander was indeed Hemetir, and he laughed at the greeting. "And may the Grand Emperor of Tianqi also enjoy infinite good health, ha ha ha."

You Miao was stunned speechless, so angry he was now shaking.

Zhao Mao kowtowed three times and Hemetir waved his hand. A soldier beside him handed Zhao Mao a doughy flatbread, which Zhao Mao

received with both hands. Then he rose and stood to the side, eating the bread.

And then it was Zhao Zhuo's turn.

Zhao Zhuo knelt to the ground; his arms extending out as he prostrated. "I also wish the Great General a good morning. May the General remain invincible and undefeated!"

Hemetir laughed heartily. "And may the Emperor of Tianqi's name also go down in history, ha ha ha—!"

The soldiers all around were laughing so hard they were tearing up as Zhao Zhuo was also granted a piece of flatbread.

"Zhao Mao! Your country's fallen! But is its integrity gone, too?!" roared an angry voice from the back.

It was indeed You Miao who had yelled, and the group instantly fell silent. The Tartars looked at each other, then erupted in devilish laughter. Among them, it was Hemetir who laughed the loudest. Zhao Zhuo's expression was unreadable, but the court officials were all chuckling nervously to go along with Hemetir, laughing with him.

And then Zhao Zhuo began to chuckle as well. He glanced at You Miao and shook his head.

Despite it all, You Miao frostily rebuked, "His Highness the Third Prince has already escaped. Let's wait for him to come avenge us, Your Majesty. You cannot kneel anymore. All men must die, so why not die a quick death instead of dragging out an ignoble existence?!"

Zhao Zhuo didn't dare respond, and turned his head away. Hemetir, however, stared at You Miao.

"Take him to the side," he instructed.

Li Yan drew in a deep breath and promptly started to shake his head. You Miao didn't know why, but after suffering humiliation for so long, his temper was flaring. Now that he'd been recaptured, survival was

no longer on his mind. His only hope now was that Zhao Chao had returned to the south and had taken control of the armies; that one day, Zhao Chao would make a comeback and avenge him—as was right. It was honestly too hard to swallow, seeing how the ruler of his country had been humiliated.

But Hemetir didn't care what he thought, and told Zhao Zhuo to prostrate again. Thus, Zhao Zhuo did as he was told, and afterward, he received another flatbread. He moved to the side to eat it.

Following him, it was the ministers' turns to prostrate. With every completed obeisance, Hemetir granted them each a flatbread to eat. Once everyone had collected their breakfast, Hemetir glanced at You Miao.

"Why do you refuse to prostrate?" Hemetir demanded.

You Miao stared at him, his eyebrows twitching. He hadn't expected this guy to speak Han so fluently.

Hemetir had a hardened face and curly beard, and his eyes were sharp and unforgiving. "Will you kneel?" he demanded.

"Maybe when you're dead," You Miao spat derisively. "One day when your emperor falls into my hands, I'll make him eat shit!"

Hemetir smirked and said something in Tartar. You Miao was taken aback at first, but was then pushed to his knees. Four Tartar soldiers surrounded him, and with iron rods, they struck down hard on You Miao's ankles. With a grunt, You Miao collapsed to the ground. They then lashed senselessly at him with whips, striking him so hard his skin split and his flesh tore. Next, they picked him up with the iron rods and spread him out, separating his arms. With two long spears, they pierced him through the palms, nailing him back to the ground.

" *Ah* —!" You Miao screamed with his entire being.

Spread wide and nailed down, You Miao convulsed uncontrollably, his eyes bulging and bloodshot. He raised his head and hatefully glared at Hemetir, rage roiling in his chest. He hacked up a mouthful of blood from the back of his throat and spat it at Hemetir.

Another round of iron rods clubbed down. You Miao was brutishly beaten to the point where he heaved blood from his guts uncontrollably, his limbs writhing like mad. The hands nailed to the snowy ground clenched and loosened in turn, until finally, there was only quiet as a pool of blood seeped out from beneath his body.

The long spears were removed, and You Miao was dragged out of the drill grounds in a bloody trail back to the prison cell.

Zhao Zhuo and the court officials watched on numbly, and Hemetir turned back to them.

"What shall we do today, oh Emperor of Tianqi?"

Zhao Zhuo promptly plastered his face with an appeasing smile. "Whatever the Great General wishes."

That evening, You Miao felt pain everywhere; it was as if his innards were going to surge out of his throat. This time, he knew he would die. Curled up in a corner, his breathing ragged, he only wished for a speedy death.

Li Yan's voice came again from outside the prison cell. "You Miao! Have you gone mad again?! Are you still alive?"

"Fucking…get the hell…away from me…" You Miao strenuously gritted out.

"You Miao, listen," Li Yan begged. "It wasn't easy for me to save you! You can't just die like this. Live, for my sake! You'll definitely be ransomed back home! All my hopes are riding on you now. Everyone is bearing humiliation to survive—why can't you just bear it too and think of a way to get revenge in the future?"

"Go back and tell that dog…dog of an emperor…" You Miao drew his last breath and spat, "With that cowardice, does he…he…he still dare heed the heavens to rule the country…and dare…dare ask me to go…go into battle…to die for him? *Forget it* !"

You Miao's last breath was blown out with his rage, and he collapsed heavily onto the ground. There were angry shouts from Tartars outside, and Li Yan let out a stifled grunt as whips cracked. Immediately, Li Yan begged for mercy and half-crawled half-stumbled as he ran away. The door of the dark little cabin was opened once more, and the seriously battered You Miao was dragged out again.

With the last vestiges of his consciousness, he felt himself being shoved into a sack. And when metal rods began to clobber him from outside, he instinctively shielded his head with his already-injured hands. Amidst the relentless pummeling, his breathing slowed and his pupils dilated as he lost control of his bowels. Urine and feces filled the bag.

After beating him for a while, the Tartars smelled the stench. Figuring he wouldn't last much longer, they hauled the sack some distance away before dumping him out. They then tied his hands and fastened the rope to a horse, before sending the horse on a run around the field as he was dragged behind.

You Miao gazed upward, thinking, *The sky is so blue today…*

It should be New Year's Eve today. When spring comes next year, will Li Zhifeng remember to sow that plot of land we had set aside?

Will the waterwheel still be turning…?

It should be another good harvest year next year…

The horse stopped.

"...His Highness the Third Prince is looking for his Han slave…"

"All the Hans we captured are in the city…"

Still convulsing, You Miao struggled to look up from where he was on the ground. He felt himself pulled up by the hair. He could hardly even see anymore, but he heard something being said.

"That's him. Convey my thanks to Hemetir. I've been looking for this slave for a long time."

You Miao was then wrapped up in a cotton blanket and carried away from the grounds.

No longer even able to speak, You Miao could only feel Li Zhifeng's head buried against him. The worn-out blanket was wrapped around them both. A moment later, warm broth tasting strongly of ginseng was poured down his throat.

Bit by bit, his consciousness returned to him, but he couldn't manage any words as he stared at Li Zhifeng. He felt something cool against his neck—it was his mother's jade pendant, the one that Li Zhifeng had someone bring to him for the Palace Exam; the one that had gotten lost when the country fell. Now, it was back with him.

"I'm di…dirty…"

You Miao wasn't quite sure why *that* of all things was at the forefront of his mind right now, but all he could think about was how dirty he was when he saw the beautiful, brand-new fur coat that Li Zhifeng was wearing. He reflexively tried to push him away, afraid to dirty his clothes.

Trembling uncontrollably from where he was buried against You Miao, Li Zhifeng howled with suppressed agony.

Life seemed to return to Yu Miao as a strange feeling slowly suffused throughout his body. Lying there unmoving, holding Li Zhifeng's hand, he gradually dozed off into a peaceful sleep free of any dreams or hallucinations. He was like an exhausted traveler who had trudged through the storm for a long, long time, and had finally found a place where he could close his eyes.

He felt Li Zhifeng remove his clothes and wipe him clean with a cloth. He also fed him medicine with a spicy kick to it.

"How's your leg?" You Miao mumbled weakly.

He opened his eyes a crack and saw Li Zhifeng gazing at him.

"Is everything all right back home?" You Miao asked tiredly.

Li Zhifeng only continued to gaze wordlessly at him, so You Miao closed his eyes and went back to sleep, holding his hand still.

[Chapter 32]

When he woke up once more, it was to the sight of colorful lights dancing across the top of the tent. The illumination came from the same glass lamp he had once hung behind the screen in his room.

The smell of ginseng jogged his memory, but the slightest movement made his entire body feel like it was falling apart. You Miao groaned. Li Zhifeng, who was chopping medicinal herbs in the corner of the tent, immediately dropped everything to hurry over with alarm in his eyes.

"You…"

You Miao had only just parted his lips and Li Zhifeng was already pulling him up into a hug with trembling arms. Constricted, You Miao couldn't move at all; in fact, the hug hurt a little. But he only felt happiness.

"Feeling better?" Li Zhifeng stared into You Miao's eyes as he asked, his voice trembling.

"I'll live…" You Miao said. "Where is this?"

"Da'an," Li Zhifeng answered in a quiet voice, glancing outward the tent. "Try not to talk too much."

You Miao's heart dropped. "Are we still in Tartar territory?"

Li Zhifeng said, "He's already left."

You Miao wasn't quite sure what he meant by that, but since Li Zhifeng was here, it meant he was safe now. It felt as if his heart, once highly strung, was finally relaxing.

"I'm hungry," You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng hurriedly set him back down and went to dig around in the corner or the tent. He retrieved a pack of cured meat, to which You

Miao said, “Gimme some.”

Li Zhifeng gestured for him to not speak. He tore the cured meat into little pieces and dropped them into the ginseng soup to cook until they were soft, then he carried a bowl of the soup over to feed him.

Now You Miao was truly revived. He tried moving his hand; his whole body hurt, but at least it could kind of move now. Li Zhifeng managed to feed him a couple of bites before You Miao started coughing.

“I don’t want anymore,” he said.

Li Zhifeng went to clean up. Sounds could be heard from outside the tent every now and again; whenever there was a voice, his eyes would narrow as he listened in. Lying in bed, You Miao stared outside the tent from the slit between the tent flaps as the sky darkened and light disappeared. Li Zhifeng changed out the candle inside the glass lamp at the top of the tent. Its colorful lights almost felt like a dream as they reflected in You Miao’s eyes.

Once done with cleaning and tidying, Li Zhifeng ate a few bites of flatbread, then sat down next to You Miao and started to chop ginseng with a dagger.

“Is that for me…?” You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng nodded.

“How did you find me?”

Li Zhifeng replied, “I set off for the capital on the fifteenth of the tenth month, traveling the south road. I came across the Han army and the Jie army engaged in battle at West Liang. The Hans lost, and the Barbarians destroyed Xishui Bridge. They set fire to all the boats. On the fifth of the eleventh month, I tried taking the north road. I tried finding my way while avoiding the Tartars, but I couldn’t get through. In the end, I had to hike up the mountains of Jiangjun Ridge to reach the capital. By the time I got there, it was the twenty-ninth of the twelfth month, and the Tartars were already occupying the city. I…I…”

The words poured out of Li Zhifeng like beans dumped out of a jar until he had to catch his breath. You Miao watched him, dumbfounded, and Li Zhifeng stared back at him. Suddenly, he stopped talking and leaned in to wrap his arms around You Miao instead, planting kiss after kiss before going still. The rims of his eyes were frightfully red.

"What happened after that?" You Miao asked.

"I couldn't find you," Li Zhifeng said. "No matter what I did, I couldn't find you. I almost went crazy. But then the Wolf God showed me the way. The Wolf God told me you were in the north, so that's the direction I went. I ran into a group of Tartars and killed them all, and then kept going. And then I finally found you." Li Zhifeng's voice started quivering again as he muttered, "I finally found you…"

Choking on a sob, You Miao said, "You're the one who wanted to go back… I didn't want you to go…"

They gazed silently at one another for a moment. Li Zhifeng nodded, parting his lips as he looked at You Miao, as if wanting to say something—but uttering nothing in the end. He returned to chopping ginseng.

Watching him chop away, You Miao couldn't help but ask, "Where is this place? Isn't it dangerous to stay in Da'an?"

"The Tartar army camp," Li Zhifeng answered without looking up. "It's their tent."

Taken aback, You Miao remembered the predicament they were in. "How will we leave? With force?"

Li Zhifeng replied, "Can't do it by force, we'd be as good as dead that way. Just follow my plans."

Reassured once more, You Miao began to recount bits and pieces of what had happened, including the events after they had parted ways. When he asked how things were back at the estate, Li Zhifeng only answered with a simple, "All settled."

You Miao asked, unable to resist, “How did you fall?”

Li Zhifeng only gave a silent nod, but You Miao was insistent, as if the things back home were more dire than his current situation.

At last, Li Zhifeng gave in and said, “I don’t know how to swim, so I got washed away by the river.”

You Miao immediately wanted to laugh, but he didn’t dare to out loud; he had to struggle to hold it back. The look on You Miao’s face made a small smile tug at the corner of Li Zhifeng’s lips.

He finished chopping the ginseng and put the morsels into a medicine pot to simmer on the stove, then got under the covers and held You Miao gently in his arms. He planted a soft kiss to his forehead, like he had found his most precious belonging and never wanted to let go of it again.

And You Miao, for his part, finally felt grounded. They were in the middle of the thousands-strong Tartar army, but with Li Zhifeng around, he no longer worried. He knew for certain that Li Zhifeng would have a way to get him out of here.

Days passed, and You Miao gradually recovered thanks to all the ginseng—in fact, he had had so much of it that it was starting give him a bit of a nosebleed from over-consumption. There was still no movement outside the tent. Li Zhifeng would go out a few times a day, and he would return with food every time.

“When are we leaving?” You Miao asked.

“When the chance comes,” Li Zhifeng answered.

“What chance?”

“A chance to get Hemetir to let us go.”

You Miao frowned. “Why try convincing him?”

Li Zhifeng shook his head.

You Miao pressed, “Do you know Hemetir?”

Li Zhifeng nodded, looking hesitant.

Even more puzzled now, You Miao asked, “Seriously, what is it? Do the Quanrong and the Tartars know each other?”

Making an affirmative noise, Li Zhifeng said, “I told them you’re my slave.”

Understanding dawned on You Miao. “I’ll be sure to act the part.”

Li Zhifeng didn’t seem to want to divulge anything else, only nodding before he grabbed a small knife and set about slicing lamb meat for You Miao. But the more You Miao thought about it, the more something felt off.

“Why do we have to wait for Hemetir to let us go?” he asked.

“Because there’s no other way to leave,” Li Zhifeng replied, not meeting You Miao’s eyes. “This is the central camp, with fifty thousand Tartars. There are another forty thousand Barbarians camped outside.”

You Miao could tell Li Zhifeng was lying. After so many years together, they could both readily tell what the other was thinking, and they were often able to pick up on many things from a subtle expression or unnatural gesture. You Miao saw through him, and Li Zhifeng knew he saw through him, but he didn’t say anything.

After a long moment, You Miao said, “Oh. Won’t we get found out, staying here like this? You should probably lie low…”

Li Zhifeng looked up at You Miao and said, “Li Yan came by.”

“What’d he say?”

“Begged you to save him and bring him back too.”

You Miao nodded.

Li Zhifeng asked, “Do we? Save him?”

“Can it be done?” You Miao asked.

“Yes,” Li Zhifeng said. “His father is already dead, and he is of no use to Hemetir. I can make a request for him.”

Encouraged, You Miao asked, “What about the Emperor?”

“No.” Li Zhifeng shook his head slowly. “There’s no way Hemetir would let any of them go, since the Han Emperor holds great value to the Tartars. They were sent to Yanbian Fortress a few days ago, to be handed to Moran Khan. The same day I arrived in Da’an.”

You Miao ventured, “What about the government officials?”

Li Zhifeng squinted his eyes as he mulled it over. You Miao knew he was asking a lot of him, but this was important—this concerned how many people would be able to escape from here. Hans who fell into Tartars’ hands had no way of fighting back, and it was only a matter of time until they were humiliated and tortured to death.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Li Zhifeng said in the end.

You Miao nodded and lay down, curling into Li Zhifeng’s arms and slowly falling asleep to the sound of cold wind howling outside.

More days passed, and You Miao, now fully healed, started to ponder about Li Zhifeng. He knew Hemetir, and he was definitely keeping something from You Miao. Considering Li Zhifeng’s skills, killing his way in to rescue You Miao might have been difficult, but he had already found him. What was so hard about getting out?

Ah, yes. Li Zhifeng had never mentioned his tribesmen before—could the Quanrong and the Tartar have some kind of secret pact between them? Li Zhifeng came all this way for the sole purpose of finding him; of this, You Miao had no doubt. But perhaps his identity was an exceedingly sensitive matter… After saving him this time, Li Zhifeng had paid back the life he owed him.

He didn't owe him anymore. Or rather, if they got down to it, it was now You Miao who owed him. Would Li Zhifeng go back then, beyond the border? You Miao's heart clenched at the very thought, feeling horribly empty all of a sudden, unsure of what to say.

Li Zhifeng looked preoccupied as well. You Miao kept wanting to talk to him, to ask him, but he didn't know how to start. What should he even say? " *The Han reign is over now. Regardless of what I think of you, the bottom line is that you're no longer a slave. You're free to go back to the border.* "? Was the slave deed the only link between them? No. You Miao had never thought of him as a slave in the first place, and he had already personally burnt the slave deed a long time ago.

Or should he say something like: " *You saved my life, we're even now.* "? But how could the mutual affection between them throughout the years be something so simple as a life saved and a life owed? If, now that Li Zhifeng had saved his life, he was going to leave him and go back beyond the border and reclaim his freedom, then You Miao would rather die right here in the Tartar army camp. He'd sooner choose death than go back alive, losing Li Zhifeng forever.

"Hey," You Miao started.

Behind him, Li Zhifeng's eyebrows twitched slightly. He propped himself up a little from where he was lying behind You Miao to look quietly at him.

"What is it?" Li Zhifeng asked in a low voice.

"Never mind," You Miao said.

But Li Zhifeng misinterpreted him and slid a hand into his shirt. You Miao's breathing picked up immediately; he clutched at Li Zhifeng's broad hand as he felt the rough lines of his palm brush over the newly-healed scars and still-blue bruises on his skin. This sensation, half a year after their parting, caused a certain feeling deep within You Miao to stir to wakefulness once more.

"I missed you," You Miao whispered.

Then he turned around to wrap his arms around Li Zhifeng's neck, entwining their lips and tongues, burning hot. Li Zhifeng's breathing grew rough as he pinned You Miao down like a starved wolf. The thing between his legs was hard as iron, solid and scalding hot. You Miao reached out to touch it, only to have his clothes roughly ripped open by Li Zhifeng. That hardness pressed into him mercilessly.

There was no oil, only the bit of wetness on Li Zhifeng's length, and You Miao cried out in pain as it breached him. But Li Zhifeng drove deep inside in one stroke. Although it hurt, the force of the motion made You Miao see stars, and he could feel Li Zhifeng's arms wrapped around him with a strength unlike anything he'd experienced before.

He paused for a moment, his head buried against You Miao's shoulder, then breathed in deeply and began to fuck him with abandon. You Miao could feel Li Zhifeng's arousal growing even larger inside of himself as it thrust in and out at a ravenous pace. The initial pain was soon replaced by pleasure, and You Miao was shaking and coming after only a few thrusts.

"I…wait… Li Zhifeng…" You Miao moaned.

Their lips parted and Li Zhifeng gazed at him, his eyes full of a gentleness he'd never before uttered aloud. But then his brows suddenly tightened for some reason before visibly evening out.

"Ah! Hold up!"

You Miao had just come; typically, Li Zhifeng would always stop to hold and kiss him for a while, and they'd stroke each other off for a bit before resuming when he could feel again. If Li Zhifeng kept on fucking him right after he'd come, it felt extremely unpleasant for You Miao.

But this time, Li Zhifeng didn't stop; he continued to fuck into him like he didn't care about You Miao's pleasure at all. You Miao squirmed and begged, but Li Zhifeng only pinned his wrists down and sealed his lips.

" *Mmf* !"

You Miao mumbled distressed pleas, but Li Zhifeng didn't even so much as pause. He drove into him a couple more times, followed by a shudder.

Suddenly, there were voices from outside the tent speaking in Tartar. Li Zhifeng immediately covered You Miao's mouth with his hand and said something in reply. You Miao's heart immediately leapt to his throat in fright.

The tent flap was lifted up as someone, laughing boisterously, strode in. His eyes raked over them without reservation—You Miao was lying in bed with Li Zhifeng on top of him. You Miao instantly recognized the guest to be the commander of the Tartar army, Hemetir!

Hemetir said, "We were just searching for you, and you show up here."

An official behind him mumbled something in the Barbarian tongue. Li Zhifeng brushed his hair back nonchalantly and said, "I can understand you."

You Miao shivered uncontrollably with how nervous he was. Hemetir said something else in Tartar, and Li Zhifeng gave a small nod in response. He got off of You Miao and casually sat to the side, baring his solid, toned chest without even trying to cover up.

The tent was deathly silent as Li Zhifeng stared at You Miao. Hemetir started to laugh again and made some comments to the people with him, then Li Zhifeng raised his hand and slapped You Miao squarely across the face. The burning sting on his cheek jolted You Miao back to his senses, and he hurriedly moved to kneel and help Li Zhifeng dress and tie his belt.

Hemetir said, "Come over to my tent later. There are a couple of things I want to ask you about."

Li Zhifeng gave a curt acknowledgement and Hemetir left.

It was only after Hemetir had been gone for a long time that Li Zhifeng turned around and pulled You Miao into his arms, holding him

close against his shoulder as he shook.

"It's all right… I get it, I understand…"

You Miao knew how wretched Li Zhifeng must feel right now. He had been so furious that time when Zhao Chao had hit him, and now he'd just done it too.

Li Zhifeng kissed his cheeks with his eyes closed.

You Miao asked, "Do I go with you later?"

Li Zhifeng nodded. "No matter what happens, don't say anything."

"Okay, got it."

Li Zhifeng helped You Miao get dressed and planted a kiss on his forehead, looking into his eyes as he pulled away. You Miao immediately understood—Li Zhifeng was also uncertain. In all the time he had known him, this might be the direst predicament they had ever found themselves in. You Miao didn't pry; under these circumstances, he knew there was no point in asking questions. He just needed to cooperate, for he trusted Li Zhifeng completely and without reservations.

Li Zhifeng got up and took You Miao out, waiting outside the tent for their escort. You Miao was still a little unsteady when he walked; after staying in bed nursing his injuries for so long, now it felt like he was floating when his feet touched the ground; like he was stepping on cotton. The Tartar in front of them only led the way and didn't speak. You Miao kept his head down, appearing perfectly docile and scared, but privately, his eyes were darting all around as his mind returned to what happened before.

There were tents all around them, packed so tight not even a breeze could seep through. He and Li Zhifeng had been staying at the heart of this camp. Troops were moving today, and so the snow on the ground was a trampled mess and slush was everywhere. You Miao had worked as the Army Censor for months, and with a single look, he could tell this was a sign of the Tartar troops returning. Deducing based on the hoof marks, there were at least ten thousand men.

Li Zhifeng had mentioned earlier that Hemetir made a trip to Yanbian and took the Emperor and the Grand Emperor with him. And now, he had brought back ten thousand men. But for what purpose? Could he be thinking of making Da'an a stronghold? Other than the Tartars, there were also Barbarians outside. He wondered where the Quanrong were, and whether they had participated in the operation with the Five Barbarian Tribes and the Tartar…

The Quanrong. In a flash, You Miao finally grasped the current situation.

The country hadn't fallen! The country wasn't lost!

Before this point, You Miao had been choked with pent-up emotions because he thought the country was destroyed. But Li Zhifeng had mentioned that there were forty thousand Tartar soldiers here and fifty thousand Barbarians on the outskirts — which also meant Tianqi hadn't perished! Otherwise, their stronghold would've been located in the capital! If the Tartars thought they had a sure win, then they would've followed through with their victory and pressed the attack home instead of stopping in Da'an.

Where had the Tianqi army retreated? Who was leading them? As long as the natural barrier of the Yangtze River held strong, then Tianqi still had hope of recovering land. As for Li Zhifeng…

You Miao glanced at Li Zhifeng's back, realizing that his identity right now might be considerably sensitive—the Third Prince of Quanrong might also become someone Hemetir was fighting to win over. In other words, this was a good opportunity to negotiate terms.

They entered the city, and all along the way, there were Tartar soldiers standing on guard. The City of Da'an had a long history, spanning three hundred years. After the founder of Tianqi took over the lands, the city was further reinforced and became made of stone. It could keep out the cold during winter and block out the sandstorms during the day; it was an immense structure built by layering giant stone blocks. It was the very picture of a forbidding fortress.

No Hans could be seen within Da'an now. This immense, great city built upon the hill had many winding paths that led to higher grounds, and You Miao kept peering at the halfway point where brown tents spread across the entire hilltop—it was the camp he'd first arrived in.

You Miao recognized that imposing stone fortress in the center, and in front of it was a big and spacious drilling ground. Behind the fortress was a cliff, and that was where he was dragged by a horse while hanging onto the last vestiges of his life, and had almost died.

With a loud sound, the great doors at the center of the fortress opened. Li Zhifeng appeared tiny and insignificant in front of this grand entrance. He turned his head a gave You Miao a look, and understanding what he meant, You Miao bowed his head before following him inside.

Boisterous laughter welcomed them. Hemetir was seated in the head chair with a circle of commanding officers sitting around him. They were drinking and eating meat.

An officer next to Hemetir said what appeared to be a joke in Tartar. Li Zhifeng didn't show any sign of being affected, and only said darkly, "Hemetir, I don't speak Tartar and my Barbarian is rusty. Let's speak in Han."

Hemetir smirked. "Interesting, Sanado. I didn't think that I'd still have to use the Southerners' language to converse with you, even after I'd conquered them. Come. Sit."

You Miao's stomach dropped. He instantly recalled that one of the five terms put forward when Hemetir besieged the capital was to hand over Quanrong's third prince, Sanado. Which meant Li Zhifeng had never revealed his identity as the third prince.

Before he had the time to dwell too much on it, Li Zhifeng had already seated himself. You Miao went to sit behind Li Zhifeng.

"Come, drink!" Hemetir beckoned.

He clapped his hands and music started. A group of maidens, divided into two lines, fluttered in gracefully as orioles to dance. When You Miao saw them, he started to shake nonstop.

They were all Han women, most of whom were familiar faces. The one playing the guqin was Zhao Chao's sister of another mother, the Thirteenth Princess Zhao Lin. The one playing the reedpipe was a girl from Tingyu Pavilion. The woman leading the dance was tall and slender and graceful in form, and to You Miao's dismay, it was indeed Tingyu Pavilion's top girl, Liu Shaling. Following closely behind her was Li Yan's wife, Madam Tang. You Miao didn't recognize most of the women in line after these two, but the oldest was about twenty and the youngest was only about twelve or thirteen.

The Qiang flutes began to play. A low, weeping moan was their sound, and their players were all Barbarian musicians. The Tartar generals stopped their conversations to enjoy the performance, listening to the music and admiring the dance. Even for someone like You Miao who rarely listened to the Qiang flute, he could hear the melancholy of longing for home in the song. It was like the rising of a bright, clear moon upon the great desert, a vast sea of sand that stretched to the horizons.

Li Zhifeng had become lost in thought. You Miao, meanwhile, noticed a girl at the very back among the elegantly dancing women. She had reddened eyes, with tears threatening to spill. She had presumably remembered the fallen capital. The country conquered, the homeland destroyed, the emperor captured, and Tianqi's women forced to dance for entertainment… With such a thorn piercing his chest, he almost coughed up blood from rage right there on the spot.

You Miao clenched his fists, his eyes brimming with tears and his body shaking uncontrollably. Li Zhifeng took a sip of wine and stole a glimpse of him when he inclined his head. He then placed his large palm on You Miao's knee, which helped You Miao calm down a little.

When the music ended, the maidens were divided into two groups, and they each approached a table to pick up a flagon to pour wine for the

guests. Li Zhifeng was still in his own world for the moment, and with a low, heavily nasal sound, he faintly hummed the song that was just performed. His eyes seemed unfocused, and You Miao knew he must be remembering his homeland.

It was Madam Tang who had come to their table. When she saw You Miao and their eyes met, Madam Tang stared him in the eyes as she poured the wine. Her hands trembled, and she spilled some of the drink. Li Zhifeng immediately snapped out of it and shot her a look.

"Saozi…" You Miao called out to her in a low whisper.

Madam Tang evaded Li Zhifeng's gaze and filled his cup, then she poured for You Miao.

"Saozi, do you know who else is locked up in Da'an? Can you help me locate them?" You Miao asked in a quiet voice.

Madam Tang's hands were shaking even harder now, and she spilled nearly half the cup. After the wine was poured, Madam Tang left, and Liu Shaling approached to replace her and serve the meal.

"You-shaoye, I have something to beg of you." Liu Shaling's voice was very soft as she passed by, and she spoke rapidly. She swiftly took off her jade bracelet. "Ziqian, I know only you can do this…"

There was a tiny *sching* sound when the bracelet was undone, and Li Zhifeng, with his sharp eyes, instantly spotted the dagger hidden against her wrist!

"What are you planning?" Li Zhifeng frowned.

You Miao had seen it too, and his face dropped instantly. He moved to stop Liu Shaling, however, the Barbarian music had restarted. Liu Shaling placed the flagon down, turned around, and re-entered the dancefloor, leading the women to begin a new dance. Their forms were lithe and graceful as butterflies as they swept past the tables.

The Tartars chortled heartily. A smile hung on Liu Shaling's face as she spun and lifted her foot, her movement soft and airy. You Miao watched her every move and felt only terror, as if this dance was a ritual before she plunged to perish with her enemies.

"Who is she?" Li Zhifeng asked in a whisper. He had never met Liu Shaling before, and his eyes were fixed on her.

You Miao answered in a low voice, "A girl from Tingyu Pavilion."

"She won't succeed in assassinating Hemetir," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao couldn't bear to watch anymore. It was as if Liu Shaling was going to be decapitated at any moment and spill her blood across the scene.

"Is Hemetir very strong?" You Miao's voice quivered.

Li Zhifeng took a sip of wine, and answered absent-mindedly, "Very."

"How strong?"

Li Zhifeng cast a glance at the head seat, and when he saw that Hemetir's attention wasn't on them, he inclined his head and snaked his arm around You Miao's waist. He whispered into his ear, "Stronger than you can imagine."

"And compared to you?" You Miao turned his head, and their lips almost touched.

Li Zhifeng nuzzled him affectionately with his nose. "You've grown."

Even though they were in imminent peril, for some reason, enthralling romance was what filled You Miao's heart.

You Miao raised his eyes and pressed their foreheads together. Staring deeply into Li Zhifeng's eyes, You Miao breathed the question again, "And compared to you…?"

“Hemetir is one of the three Gods of War north of the frontier,” Li Zhifeng replied.

You Miao understood now — this meant Liu Shaling would never be able to succeed. His heart clenched at the thought.

“We have to think of a way to get her from him,” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng didn’t respond. He only gazed quietly at You Miao, giving him a questioning look.

You Miao immediately got it. Li Zhifeng was asking, “ *Are you sure?* ” And suddenly, You Miao *wasn’t* sure.

Should he really stop Liu Shaling? This was clearly something she had already thought through — or rather, she had already come to terms with her death. You Miao was horribly conflicted, but Li Zhifeng simply sat there quietly drinking his wine and watching the maidens dance. Liu Shaling was dancing closer and closer to the head seat. Then, the women spun around, and each were pulled into the arms of an officer.

You Miao’s heart instantly lurched, the jade bracelet Liu Shaling gave him gripped tightly in his hands. She wasn’t done talking earlier! He could only hope that for the sake of finishing what she had wanted to say, she wouldn’t make a move so rashly.

Liu Shaling was sitting in the arms of a Tartar commander, her eyes hesitant, and she stole another glance at You Miao in spite of herself. You Miao’s frown deepened, looking anxious. From where he sat on the far side from her, he gave a small, exceedingly slow shake of his head.

The one Hemetir held in his arms was Princess Huaiming, who was only thirteen years old and on the verge of tears — clearly a little at a loss for what to do. Hemetir was red in the face from drink, and he pressed his beard against the princess’s face, rubbing back and forth. Madam Tang was slightly older in age and no one had picked her, so she had no choice but to approach You Miao’s table and drape herself over Li Zhifeng. Li Zhifeng blocked her with an imperceptible push, and thus she moved to sit down beside the pair.

The Tartars were smooching the women in their arms, pressing kisses all over them, and You Miao knew the feast was coming to an end. He prayed inwardly for the women to please, please not do anything rash… The Tartars were all drunk on wine as they swayed about. The first of them pronounced what sounded like a request in a loud voice, to which Hemetir answered with a chuckle. The fearless commanding officers thus staggered out, one by one, with the maidens in their arms.

More and more of them left the feast, until finally, only Hemetir and Li Zhifeng remained. Hemetir gave an instruction in Tartar, and the musicians put away their instruments and exited while two guards closed the door behind them.

"Eat some," Li Zhifeng directed You Miao, and passed him a piece of lamb. Knowing what he had to do, You Miao knelt to the side, his head bowed low, and he started gorging himself like a slave.

Hemetir put his wine cup down and asked, smiling without mirth, "Where did you find this slave?"

Startled, You Miao knew that this was trouble. Previously, in order to save You Miao's life, Li Yan had begged Hemetir for mercy and mentioned You Miao's identity—that his family were rich merchants from Jiangnan, and they would ransom him handsomely. Yet Li Zhifeng had declared him a slave. Did Hemetir not recognize him?

Ah, yes… Hemetir had only seen him once. He had instructed You Miao to be beaten to death, and then he had left. When Li Zhifeng arrived in Da'an, Hemetir was in Yanbian, so he never saw Li Zhifeng save You Miao.

"Raise your head and let me see your face," Hemetir demanded, amused.

You Miao froze, and Li Zhifeng said coldly, "He's calling you; didn't you hear?"

You Miao quickly looked up, but Hemetir only gave him a glance before he snorted. "He looks at least seventeen or eighteen, right? Why

didn’t you find a prettier one? One more like a woman?”

“He’s got a unique trick and serves me well in bed, so I’ve grown reluctant to throw him away.”

Hemetir burst out laughing, then shook his head helplessly, obviously unable to fathom Li Zhifeng’s interest. It was said that the Tianqi enjoyed the pleasure of male company. The Tartars had naturally heard of this, but men usually favored gentle and charming young boys. As far as male lovers went, You Miao was a bit old and he didn’t have the soft and meek appearance of a woman at all.

“He also knows how to brew Han tea,” Li Zhifeng said impassively. He then instructed You Miao, “Go brew a pot of tea. I will drink with the general.”

Hemetir gave an instruction in a raised voice, and his subordinates came with a full tea set—one they had stolen.

“The tea the Hans drink is different from our Northern butter tea. I suppose trying it wouldn’t hurt,” Hemetir said with amusement.

“They don’t add salt to their tea. No milk or butter.” Li Zhifeng appeared at ease. “It’s quite the art.”

There was a strip seal taping the case shut, and with a single look, You Miao could tell it was something stolen from the palace. There were also two jars of Sunshower Qingfeng tribute tea next to it. He first placed a kettle over the brazier to boil water before ripping the seal off, opening the case. The instant that the case was opened, a wave of mixed emotions rushed to his head—this was the same tea set You Miao and Zhao Zhuo had used in the palace. One of the glass cups was already shattered.

It was incredibly quiet within the hall. No one was speaking, and all eyes were fixated on You Miao brewing tea.

Upon seeing this tea set that was once from the palace unveiled in such a place, a thought surfaced in You Miao’s mind. He couldn’t describe

it, but at that moment, a powerful desire for revenge welled up from the bottom of his heart.

Before this night, he was still lost and uncertain in regards to the country's future. But his conviction was hardened when he saw that broken glass cup.

He was going back. And he was going to seek revenge.

[Chapter 33]

Hemetir watched You Miao brew the pot of tea, scrutinizing him. Seeing the glass pot change colors, his brows gradually knitted as if something had come to mind. You Miao's heart was beating harder the longer this went on, worried that Hemetir was going to recognize him at last. Thus, he pretended that the stare was scaring him and lowered his head.

"Sanado, the time has come for you to leave the Wall," Hemetir said.

"That time has already passed," Li Zhifeng replied impassively.

"Your older brother has always searched for you throughout the years."

"He's worried that I'm not dead," Li Zhifeng clarified simply.

Hemetir narrowed his eyes and smirked wickedly.

After the tea had brewed, You Miao placed a cup of green tea in front of Hemetir, then bowed low as he placed another cup on Li Zhifeng's table. Neither party said a word. Li Zhifeng pinched the teacup by its edge and took a sip while Hemetir dunked the whole thing into his open mouth, emptying it in a second.

"Heh." Hemetir sneered. "The things the Hans come up with aren't as good as the pestle tea we make beyond the border."

Li Zhifeng said, addressing You Miao, “You Hans spend your days hankering after luxuries and pleasures, fiddling around with these unnecessary matters and proclaiming yourselves refined—no wonder your country would fall.”

You Miao hung his head, ready to serve tea again, but Hemetir only made a wide sweep of his hand, indicating he did not want any more.

“Sanado, when are you going back to reclaim what should’ve been yours?” Hemetir asked.

Li Zhifeng grunted but didn’t give a clear answer.

Hemetir leaned forward, a hand pressed down on his blade, and said, “Sanado, you’d better think carefully about this. Prince Gergen awaits your answer.”

Not bothering to look at Hemetir, Li Zhifeng replied, “I’ve no army of my own. I am completely alone in this world, and my only subordinate is a Han. Five years ago, all of my guards died at Menghe Pass. And now, Kuzha Khan wants to aid me — ”

Hemetir interrupted in a low voice, “It’s Prince Gergen who is willing to help you return to your homeland.”

“…My concern is that you’ve neither the time nor energy,” Li Zhifeng finished.

Hemetir extended a hand, seeming to gesture that he didn’t need to say any more. The gears in You Miao’s head turned, gradually piecing together the fragments of information he didn’t know from their conversation.

Yet in the next second, Li Zhifeng asked, “Five thousand?”

“Five hundred!” Hemetir seemed to be enraged. “I’ll give you five hundred of the elites.”

Li Zhifeng shook his head slowly. “Five hundred soldiers can kill; not conquer.”

“Then what do you want?!” Hemetir demanded.

But Li Zhifeng only continued to shake his head.

Hemetir drew in a deep breath, watching Li Zhifeng’s silent form, and at that moment, the air in the hall felt tense. Li Zhifeng put down the cup. He leveled one hand at his chest, flipping the palm upward, and gave a light welcome gesture. Then he gave You Miao a look.

You Miao understood that this meant they were leaving and rose to his feet.

Li Zhifeng bade farewell. “My faraway friend, I thank you for your hospitality.”

Hemetir snorted but didn’t try to keep him, and so Li Zhifeng turned around and left with You Miao in tow.

The sky was already completely dark by the time they emerged from the stone fortress. Li Zhifeng followed the path they had taken earlier, and the entire way, You Miao didn’t dare to speak. When they descended the hill, they broke off from the main road that was lit by torches. Unable to see clearly, You Miao almost tripped. The movement had Li Zhifeng turn around to catch him. After walking for a bit longer, Li Zhifeng bent down.

“Climb on,” he beckoned.

“No.” You Miao didn’t dare have Li Zhifeng carry him. “Careful of being seen.”

“This area is fine,” Li Zhifeng replied.

“Hemetir has seen me before, and knows I’m a high official of Tianqi. He just didn’t recognize me just now,” You Miao said.

“Your identity isn’t important at all. Just climb on,” Li Zhifeng prompted.

You Miao was a bit doubtful, but at the end of the day, he trusted Li Zhifeng wholly, so he climbed onto his back, letting him carry him. There

was a stretch of road they still had to take after leaving the City of Da'an, but Li Zhifeng simply carried You Miao thus, his pace slow as he walked. Neither of them said a word.

After a long while of deliberation, You Miao finally decided to speak up. "Is he telling you to go back to your tribe?"

"Mn." Li Zhifeng's voice was deep and steady as he said, "Prince Gergen is the Tartar's eldest prince. If Khuzha Khan dies one of these days, the fight for the throne will definitely plunge the Tartars in civil unrest. He wants to win the support of the Quanrong."

You Miao had heard Sun Yu say once that the Tartars had many villages, and that those villages determined who succeeded the throne. Unlike the Hans, who observed the rule of legal and common-born, they prioritized the strength of each village and the amount of support from foreign tribes. You Miao had wanted to ask Li Zhifeng about his decision at first, yet who would've thought he'd be distracted by this accidental news.

"Is Kuzha Khan dying?" You Miao asked, unable to resist.

The princes usually only ever clashed for the throne when the reigning ruler was in poor health.

Li Zhifeng's answer was terse, however. "Not sure."

"The Five Barbarian Tribes don't support Prince Gergen?" You Miao asked.

"No. The Five Barbarian Tribes are divided into factions," Li Zhifeng explained. "There are those who support Gabittu, and those who support Queen Baoiin and the prince of West Jie."

You Miao was a little confused now, and he mulled this information over with a frown. A while later, he asked, "But the Five Barbarian Tribes and Hemetir have worked together for a long time; hasn't he already won them over?"

“No,” Li Zhifeng replied. “This invasion of the South had long been planned by the Tartars; they’ve been making preparations for a year now. It was all a part of Kuzha Khan’s scheme: the Han general Nie Dan being transferred away, and the Five Barbarian Tribes invading the Central Plains via West Liang and delaying the main force.”

You Miao was shocked by this information, and his breathing quickened. Li Zhifeng breathed a soft sigh; a sigh that sounded particularly clear in the quiet of night.

“Why did you say my identity didn’t matter?” You Miao asked.

“Because the Tartars won’t believe that, as a Quanrong, I would be willing to help a Southern Han,” Li Zhifeng replied. “Me being loyal to a Han would also never cross their minds.”

You Miao hugged Li Zhifeng around the neck and buried his head in his nape. “I want to go home,” he said in a small voice. “Do you want to go home too?”

“Quanrongs don’t have homes,” Li Zhifeng said.

“I meant back to your tribe…” You Miao explained. “If you want to go back to your tribe, then go. I didn’t know you were Sanado before; I didn’t know you’re the Quanrong prince.”

Li Zhifeng abruptly asked, “And if you had?”

You Miao was stumped by this question.

What if he *had* known Li Zhifeng’s identity from the start? This question confounded You Miao. Suppose he had known since the beginning that the slave he bought was a prince, how would he have treated him? Would he have let him go? Or kept him by his side?

“I don’t know,” You Miao mumbled to himself. “Things would’ve probably still been the same.”

Li Zhifeng returned to his quiet self, walking toward the army camp carrying You Miao.

After a long contemplation, You Miao felt there were some things that he still had to tell Li Zhifeng. He started, “I’m a Han, you’re a Quanrong. Between countries, there will be conflicts, massacres, prisoners of war, slaves. We can’t control any of that. You were captured by the Hans and suffered; Li Yan even had the mind to kill you. But I saved you. I admit, yes, I didn’t see you as a friend at first. But over these past years living in the Central Plains, although you didn’t live the life of a prince, I still… I still…”

You Miao choked up, unable to continue all of a sudden. Having listened this far, Li Zhifeng stopped in his step.

“…I still never took you for a slave,” You Miao said, finding his voice again. “Ever since you rescued me at Yanbian, I stopped thinking we were master and slave. That period of time, when I went back to Jiangnan, I only had you by my side. Li Zhifeng, I…depend on you very much. I know you only have me, but that’s the same for me too. There’s no one else but you. This was already on my mind during the trip back to the capital for the exams…”

Li Zhifeng suddenly chuckled. “Don’t get it,” he said, grinning.

You Miao was a little surprised; he very, very rarely saw Li Zhifeng laugh. The night was pitch black and he couldn’t see Li Zhifeng’s face, but he knew Li Zhifeng was smiling.

“…At the time, I thought, it seems in this life…I can’t bear to part with you anymore…”

You Miao continued his thoughts while Li Zhifeng only quietly stood there with him on his back. Having revealed so much, a sudden wave of sadness washed over You Miao.

“I love you. I want to marry you. Just like when we were together, you’d take care of me like I’m your wife… That sounds a little weird, but…” You Miao thought for a moment, then recited with utmost seriousness, “‘ *Who knows when we’ll meet once more; this time, this night, my feelings are hard to endure* .’ [3]”

At that moment, You Miao laughed out in spite of himself. He had a million things he wanted to say, all of which were long-winded ramblings, but none of it could compare to this one verse.

Li Zhifeng stopped again and let You Miao down. They had already made it to the army camp, and the brightly lit infantry tents were mere steps away. You Miao came around to his side, wanting to say more, but Li Zhifeng turned away, evading the lights. For the flash of a second, You Miao saw that the corners of his eyes were shimmering with tears!

"Go on," Li Zhifeng said.

"No."

You Miao took a step forward and firmly hugged Li Zhifeng around the waist.

"If you want to go home, then go. I won't stop you," You Miao said. "There's no deeper meaning to what I said today. Since we've come to know each other, I just wanted to let you know that this is how I feel. If I was a woman, then it wouldn't matter if I was a Han or a Barbarian, I'd follow you. But I'm a man. I can't *not* avenge my country and I can't *not* care for the state of Tianqi."

Li Zhifeng made a noise, neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and only responded with, "Got it."

You Miao was a little bemused, but Li Zhifeng simply clutched his hand and led him toward their tent.

You Miao tried again, "You…"

"I… I got it." Li Zhifeng turned his head away, his voice a little choked.

You Miao saw it clearly this time—Li Zhifeng was crying.

The two returned to the tent. Li Zhifeng sat down wordlessly, and You Miao didn't try to ask after his thoughts again. But now that everything that had been pent up in his heart had been spilled, his mind was finally at

ease. You Miao lay down in bed and flopped around, watching Li Zhifeng in a daze. “ *He’s so handsome* ” was the only thought on his mind.

Perhaps after helping You Miao escape, Li Zhifeng would go home, and they would be off to their own worlds, never to meet again.

After a very, very long time, though You Miao was already dozing off, Li Zhifeng said quietly, “My brother wants to get rid of me.”

You Miao was suddenly very awake. “Hm?”

“That year, he set up a trap. He told me go to Menghe County, and it was there where I ran into the Hans…”

“I know.” You Miao had already guessed a few things from Hemetir and Li Zhifeng’s exchange. “Then afterward, you were captured and taken to the capital?”

Li Zhifeng nodded. You Miao was a bit curious why he was bringing this up now, but then Li Zhifeng continued, “That day, in Yanbian, you let me go. But I couldn’t have gone back. My brother would’ve killed me. I could no longer stay in the tribe.”

What had happened years ago immediately came back to You Miao. At Yanbian, after he had put the slave deed and money in Li Zhifeng’s hands and bade him farewell, Li Zhifeng returned… That incident felt so far away, like it was something that had taken place in their past life — but at the same time, it felt as close as if it had just flashed before his eyes.

Realization dawned on You Miao. “So…after I left Yanbian, you followed me…”

You Miao scrambled to his feet and firmly hugged Li Zhifeng from behind. Li Zhifeng was writhing, his breathing harsh and heavy. This was the most agitated You Miao had ever seen him. In the end, he turned around, wordlessly, and stared at You Miao with bloodshot eyes that were rolling with restrained tears.

They embraced and kissed, and it felt as though You Miao's soul had returned at last; the heart that had been so highly strung had finally been grounded. Li Zhifeng's fingers dug into You Miao's hair, and he hugged him with a force he never before used on him.

"Do you want to go back to your tribe, then?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng replied quietly, "I… I don't know…"

"That's all right," You Miao consoled. "If you want to go, then just go."

Li Zhifeng loosened his hold, and they gazed deeply at each other as if they would be facing imminent separation in the next second. You Miao looked into his eyes and caressed his face.

"You know why I have to go back, and I also know why you would want to go back."

Li Zhifeng's lips twitched, seeming to want to say something. But before anything could be uttered, they were interrupted by voices of soldiers from outside their tent. Immediately, You Miao let go of Li Zhifeng and went to kneel behind him. Li Zhifeng fixed his robes, a small frown tugging his lips. Soon after, Madam Tang opened the tent flap, bending as she entered, and knelt before Li Zhifeng.

You Miao quickly understood. Madam Tang was presumably here to accompany him through the night.

Madam Tang exhaled a small breath. You Miao could see she was clutching a hairpin in her hand—to commit suicide should the situation call for it.

"Don't be scared, saozi," You Miao hurriedly whispered. He stood up and went to the entrance. Once he made sure that the soldiers who brought Madam Tang had left, he announced, "They're gone."

Li Zhifeng nodded, then he picked up a copper pot and poured a bowl of sheep milk. He placed the bowl in front of Madam Tang. Madam

Tang's eyes were red and she was shaking nonstop. She glanced at Li Zhifeng, then glanced at You Miao.

You Miao gestured for her to relax. "Drink something first."

Madam Tang took a sip of the sheep milk, her nervousness finally subsiding somewhat.

"Where's Liu Shaling?" You Miao asked.

"She won't survive past tonight," Madam Tang said, regaining herself. "Miao-zi, you…" She glanced at Li Zhifeng again.

"This is Li Zhifeng," You Miao said. "We can trust him, don't worry."

With the reassurance, Madam Tang immediately grabbed You Miao's hands. "Miao-zi, promise me one thing. Only you can help us now…"

Remembering how Liu Shaling didn't have the chance to finish what she had wanted to say during the feast earlier, You Miao quickly said, "I know. I'll think of a way to rescue you all. Tell them not to panic."

"That's not it." Madam Tang's lips were parched and cracked. "I'm fine. I know that you're having a hard time saving yourself as it is; I daren't expect you to rescue all of us. But I beg you, if there's a chance, please find a way to save your ge…"

Madam Tang folded the hems of her skirt under her knees and prostrated before You Miao. You Miao was stunned by the gesture.

Madam Tang continued, "Of all of your brothers, you're the only one who is safe right now. Li Yan, Qian Hui, Ping Xi, and the rest are all locked up. My father-in-law is already dead and the ministers of the six ministries were all sent to Yanbian… You have to think of a way. At the very least, take Li Yan and the others…"

"Done," You Miao said. "Saozi, don't any of you despair and take things too hard. Stay alive. Zhao Chao and the rest must have escaped to

safety by now."

Madam Tang stared at You Miao with wide, unnerving eyes. "Miao-zi, I don't think you understand why they must be rescued."

You Miao frowned slightly, and Madam Tang continued, "It's because only they can help the South rise up to recover the country and take His Majesty back. Don't let Zhao Chao settle and become content in retaining sovereignty over only a part of the country. The only thing I can do for you now is to make you all remember this—"

"Don't!" Alarmed, You Miao hastily got up and tugged at Madam Tang's sleeve. "Saozi…"

Madam Tang's voice gradually calmed, and she said languidly, "You understand your ge's temper. He will never rest if his wife dies in Da'an; he will certainly retaliate to avenge me. He won't be a spineless coward and live on for the sake of living."

"No, no, no… You listen to me!" You Miao exclaimed urgently.

Gripping the hairpin in her hand, Madam Tang stood up. "Miao-zi, I will go on first. Please give this to my husband."

From within her robes, she pulled out a handkerchief densely covered with purplish black characters—it was a letter written in blood, which she had composed previously.

"And give this to Zhao Chao." Madam Tang handed You Miao a jade butterfly. "This is from Princess Huaiming, to ensure he remembers to come back here and personally avenge his little sister…"

Just then, a sharp, heartrending scream tore through the air from a distance.

The voice had come from atop the hill, but was nonetheless infinitely clear in the silent night. You Miao dashed out, but Madam Tang stole past him, making a run for it.

"Stop her!" You Miao cried in horror.

Li Zhifeng emerged and dragged Madam Tang back into the tent, and You Miao exclaimed, “Don’t let her die!”

Li Zhifeng hand-chopped Madam Tang right on the back of her neck, and she instantly fainted. You Miao was terrified that she would go seek her own death again and swiftly bound her hands with strips of cloth. He then placed her in a corner of the tent.

“The girls made a move?” You Miao wondered. “What do we do?”

Li Zhifeng didn’t know what to say at the moment either, and the two stared at each other in silence. A minute later, Li Zhifeng said, “I’ll go take a look.”

“Don’t go just yet,” You Miao said. “The commotion has already started, so if you go now, Hemetir will see through you. Wait for a bit. And if I’m not wrong, someone will come.”

Sure enough, it didn’t take long before a soldier hurried to their tent to inquire after their well-being — to which Li Zhifeng responded, “Everything’s fine.”

He fastened his belt as he walked out, looking calm and composed amidst the confusion. “What’s happened with General Hemetir?”

The soldier answered in broken Han tongue, “The women have… assassinate, the generals are all…s-safe.”

“Take me over there,” Li Zhifeng ordered.

He shot You Miao a look and You Miao followed him out, intending to go together, but Li Zhifeng stopped him and furrowed his brows. With his eyes, he silently told You Miao not to go, that he should stay and watch over Madam Tang lest something else happen. He would find a way to help the other women.

Without a choice in the matter, You Miao nodded and went back into the tent. Li Zhifeng thus left.

Frightfully nervous, You Miao covered Madam Tang with a blanket in case anyone else came. He then put his head down on the low table the entire night, worrying. He stayed distressed like that until the fourth watch, when he at last succumbed and fell deeply asleep. At daybreak, Li Zhifeng entered the tent, and You Miao was instantly alert. When he saw a soldier taking Madam Tang out, You Miao felt his entire body go cold.

After the soldier left, Li Zhifeng whispered, “Don’t worry, she won’t die.”

You Miao lay down in bed on his side, and Li Zhifeng stripped off his outer robe and climbed under the covers to hold him.

“How are things?” You Miao asked.

“Princess Huaiming and Liu Shaling failed in their assassination attempt and died,” Li Zhifeng replied.

Tears rolled down You Miao’s cheeks, and Li Zhifeng continued, “The rest have all kept their lives. Hemetir agreed to give me Madam Tang, but she can’t be kept in this tent just yet.”

You Miao nodded, feeling indescribably sad. He asked, “Did you promise Hemetir that you’d go back to fight your da-ge?”

“No,” Li Zhifeng replied.

“You can for now,” You Miao suggested.

“No,” Li Zhifeng said. “If I cannot fulfill the promise, then I’d be breaking my word. The Quanrong and Tartar both value promises with the utmost solemnity; it’s different with you Hans. The only thing we can do is to think of a way to deal with them. We can’t say one thing and do another. I’ll go inquire after the whereabouts of Li Yan and the others tomorrow, and see if I can buy them.”

You Miao nodded, so spent that he could barely keep his eyes open, and slowly fell asleep.

[Chapter 34]

That afternoon, You Miao began to devise his plan of escape while Li Zhifeng was out. He must come up with a way to do what Madam Tang had asked of him last night. And if feasible, it'd be ideal if all the other women could be rescued too. After all, they weren't considered important to the Tartars—some Tartars might not even know who Qian Hui was or what government positions Ping Xi and the others had held. Li Yan was the only tricky one, since the Tartars had seen him before at the peace talks.

You Miao rolled open a vellum sheet, and after humming for a moment, he drew from memory a map of the army camp that he'd seen while out yesterday. This was an exceedingly difficult process. He sketched as he tried to recall the roads and terrain outside of Da'an as well. An entire afternoon passed this way without him realizing it, until the tent flap was soundlessly peeled back.

Jolting in surprise, You Miao quickly put the map away. However, it was Li Zhifeng who had returned, and he brought with him some roasted lamb. Sighing in relief, You Miao showed him the map.

After examining it briefly, Li Zhifeng asked, "When do we go?"

You Miao shook his head. "Wait until Hemetir leaves?"

Li Zhifeng furrowed his brows a little at that, and You Miao asked, "Will he go back to Yanbian any time soon?"

"Yes," Li Zhifeng replied.

"Let's go as soon as he leaves?" You Miao suggested.

The furrow of Li Zhifeng's brows deepened as he shook his head slowly. After a long while, he said, "He's preparing to attack Jiangnan."

Although startled by the news, something else occurred to You Miao. "When he leaves Da'an, so will the great army! We can use that chance to escape!"

Li Zhifeng didn't respond and only stared at You Miao. His reaction confused You Miao, but he could vaguely guess why.

Sure enough, Li Zhifeng said, "He wants to take me to Yanbian to meet Kuzha Khan, then have me command an army to embark on a campaign in the southern prefectures."

You Miao became subdued and stillness fell over them. After this despairing silence, You Miao asked quietly, "Are you going to attack my homeland? Attack my people?"

Li Zhifeng immediately replied, "No."

You Miao rubbed the bridge of his nose, his thoughts thrown into complete chaos. He opened his mouth, wanting to say something, but knowing how Li Zhifeng must be even more tormented than he was, You Miao decided against questioning him further.

"I found Li Yan and your other friends' whereabouts," Li Zhifeng said, changing the subject. "Come with me."

You Miao stood and wordlessly followed Li Zhifeng out of the tent. As they crossed through the army camp, You Miao asked in spite of himself, "What's the relationship between you and Hemetir? Are you two very close?"

"We met a few times when I was little," Li Zhifeng replied. "The one who taught me how to ride and shoot was the Tartar Jebe, who was one of his buddies. But later, war broke out between the Tartar and the Quanrong, and Tetsubye died; felled by my brother's arrow."

"Ah." You Miao didn't know how to comment on the relationship between the Quanrong and the Tartar, but by the sounds of it, it was very complicated.

"I had originally wanted to come and take you back before Hemetir returned to Da'an," Li Zhifeng said, sounding troubled. "But with your injuries, I was afraid you wouldn't be able to take the bumpiness of a long ride. If you were the only one to be saved, then I could've just told Hemetir

that I'm sending you to deliver a letter to my brother, and you could've slipped away en route to go back to Jiangnan."

"Then what about you?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng didn't answer.

The two reached a small hill. You Miao scanned around and noticed that the guards here were fairly relaxed. Li Yan was hustling about behind the hill, his hands and feet shackled. Every Han here was pulling a cart carrying dead bodies that mostly belonged to the massacred people of the city.

The Han slaves had to haul the corpses of their own people to the outskirts of the city and throw them into a pit. The pit would be set ablaze every few days to incinerate the corpses. Li Yan was both filthy and disheveled, his clothes in tatters. The former noble sons were all frozen black and blue, yet they shivered instead in fear as they slaved away for the Tartars.

"Do you hate him?" You Miao asked, standing beyond the pit.

"No," Li Zhifeng answered impassively.

"I want to save him," You Miao said.

"You mentioned that last night," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao had thought that since Li Yan almost killed Li Zhifeng once, maybe Li Zhifeng still held onto that grudge. He pressed, "What I meant was, can I rescue him?"

Li Zhifeng inclined his head. "Yes. It's your call."

Incidentally, there was no one around the cremation pit just then, so You Miao flipped over the edge and slipped down to it. Meanwhile, Li Zhifeng walked away to higher grounds to keep a lookout for him. The noise of You Miao's downward movement alerted the young men disposing the bodies, and they all straightened up. There was a flash of a second when

hope appeared on everyone's faces, and they all made to dash toward You Miao.

"Ziqian!" Qian Hui cried.

"About time!" Ping Xi exclaimed. "You're still alive!"

"Don't any of you come over here!" Li Yan warned in a harsh whisper.

You Miao ran to Li Yan's side and grabbed him by the collar, pushing him against the wall. He scolded, his voice dark and threatening, "You useless trash! After all that education, where the hell is your integrity?!"

Instantly enraged, Li Yan grabbed You Miao's robes in turn and spun them around, pushing You Miao against the wall instead. His face was scrunched up in savage rage as he hissed vehemently, " *I'm* useless trash?! Can integrity save the people? Can integrity drive the Tartars back to their homes? Why don't *you* tell *me* ?! You have Li Zhifeng to protect you—well, what about the rest of us? The others I can let slide, but *you* of all people don't get it?! Did your conscience get eaten by dogs, you fucker? If it wasn't for me shielding you, you would've died on your first day here! I kowtowed with everything I had in front of the Tartar dogs in exchange for half a day of your life, and you went and used it to talk about integrity? Some *honor* ?!"

You Miao and Li Yan looked like two angry bulls locking horns as they both panted. Li Yan regained his calm after a moment, then through gritted teeth, he said, "You've read the books. Didn't your teacher teach you the story of Gou Jian sleeping on brushwood and tasting gall [4]? Gou Jian can even eat shit! Wait 'til I'm back in the south; you'll see whether integrity can save Tianqi, or whether *I'm* the more capable one!"

You Miao breathed a long sigh, now understanding Madam Tang's persistence.

Li Yan, however, stopped paying attention to him. Looking as if he'd lost all hope for You Miao, he turned around and returned to moving

the corpses.

"Li Yan!" called one of the young men in a small voice. "Come here, you guys."

"I'm busy!" Li Yan replied in a huff. "Go back to your work, all of you! Don't fucking let it get to your heads, he's not here to save us!"

"It's not that!" The young man leaned on his shovel and beckoned Li Yan. "Come here, see who this girl is…"

Li Yan froze for a second, then threw down his shovel and sped over.

You Miao followed right after him, and a number of young men gathered around to look at the body on the cart. It was Liu Shaling. Her body was black and blue and mangled, destroyed beyond recognition. Her wrists were still bound by ropes that cut to the bone, exposing the mutilated flesh.

Stillness befell them. You Miao could almost hear the resounding music of guqin playing in his ears. The hands that were now broken had once delicately plucked the strings as her sweet voice sang, " *From south to north the coupled geese fly; through cold and heat, aging wings held high…"* [5]

"It's Miss Liu…" someone said in a small voice.

There was another moment of silence before someone started to weep. You Miao also sniffled, unable to hold back.

Stoically, Li Yan said, "Bury her."

He turned around and slowly trudged back to his spot from before. Watching his back, You Miao got the impression that Li Yan was hunching.

"She gave you this."

You Miao dug the jade bracelet from his robes and placed it in Li Yan's hand. Li Yan glanced at it, but didn't say anything.

You Miao added quietly, “I’ll have Li Zhifeng find a way to get all of you out of here.”

Still staring at the jade bracelet, Li Yan replied in a cracked voice, “We’ll need horses that can run for at least a day and night. Otherwise, the Tartars would catch up as soon as we escape. From West Liang to Hanyin, it’s all Barbarian territory now.”

“We won’t go their way,” You Miao said. “We’ll go via Zheng Liang Pass and head to East Liang—enter Tartar domain and go back by way of Goryeo.”

Li Yan drew the map of Da’an on the ground and then looked up to meet You Miao’s eyes, making a mark on the map. That marked where the prison was.

“Remember this. Absolutely remember this.”

“Midnight tomorrow, I’ll try to steal the horses,” You Miao said.

“Just take the others with you. I won’t be able to go, the Tartars all know me,” Li Yan said. “When you get back, find my father-in-law and tell him to ransom me.”

You Miao whispered next to Li Yan’s ear, “We’ll give it a shot first and then see if things don’t work out.”

Li Yan said, “I’m not locked up in the same place as Ping Xi and the others! They’re slaves. Orgos asked and got me from Hemetir…”

“I’ll have Li Zhifeng try to buy you from Orgos,” You Miao said. “Don’t tell anyone. Tomorrow at midnight. Don’t forget to tell them about that.”

Li Yan and You Miao parted. You Miao then swiftly leapt up to the edge of the pit and told Li Zhifeng the plan he and Li Yan had devised.

“The stables are on the west end,” You Miao said. “Once I’ve stolen the horses, I’ll wait outside the west gate for you.”

“I’ll be breaking them all out?” Li Zhifeng asked.

“It’s like this,” You Miao explained, “let’s split up and act separately. For the first half of the night, we’ll steal horses together and then steal the prison keys to Ping Xi and the others’ cells. The second half of the night, you go save the women and I’ll go rescue the men.”

Li Zhifeng nodded without hesitation. You Miao continued, “Is Orgos a general?”

After a brief thought, Li Zhifeng replied, “He was the one sitting in the third seat below Hemetir that day at the feast.”

“Are you able to buy Li Yan from him?” You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng frowned slightly. “I’ll deal with it.”

They returned to their tent, and that entire afternoon, You Miao studied the map without speaking a word. The plan he was going to enact was extremely dangerous—not only did he have to break Li Yan and the gang out, he had to take their families with him too. He carefully analyzed the possible routes of escape and then marked down the guards’ shift change times. While You Miao stared at the map, Li Zhifeng stared at him.

“Who taught you how to steal horses?” Li Zhifeng asked abruptly.

“Huh?” You Miao was deep in thought and the question had caught him off guard. He started to laugh.

“You’re different from before,” Li Zhifeng said.

“How so?” You Miao frowned a little.

Li Zhifeng didn’t answer, but he shook his head. Not getting his response, You Miao looked back down and returned to concentrating on the map—except he couldn’t anymore, now that he was occupied with what Li Zhifeng had said. He studied the map half-heartedly, then looked up again to gaze at Li Zhifeng. Li Zhifeng arched an eyebrow.

They were like this too, back when they were at Riverwave Estate. You Miao would have his head down reading and Li Zhifeng would watch him read. It had been the most natural thing in the world at the time. However, after half a year of separation, You Miao gradually sensed something different. It was as though Li Zhifeng's gaze was tangible, and it made You Miao's heart race whenever he watched him.

What had changed? You Miao couldn't help but wonder.

They were in a similar situation, once upon a time. Abruptly, You Miao sort of understood what Li Zhifeng had meant—had this been back when he and Li Zhifeng first met, perhaps You Miao wouldn't have done things like stealing horses and launching rescues. If this was four years ago, what would You Miao have done had he been captured and brought to Da'an? Probably wait for Li Zhifeng to save him, and then the two would escape, leaving the others behind.

But now, he was indeed different from before. In retrospect, it wasn't anything Li Zhifeng had taught him. Li Zhifeng's comment about stealing horses came to mind again, and suddenly, You Miao understood what he was implying.

Although Li Zhifeng didn't often speak, everything he did say meant something.

Indeed. Things like stealing horses had been taught to him by Zhao Chao. What he'd learned from Zhao Chao overall these years was perhaps a brazen, dauntless courage.

You Miao decided to simply meet Li Zhifeng's gaze and ask, "Different from before… Is that good or bad?"

"Good. You've grown up," Li Zhifeng replied.

You Miao nodded, grinning.

In the time that followed, neither spoke until dinner was delivered. It was boiled lamb, baked cumin bread, and milk tea. Li Zhifeng served You Miao the meal, which You Miao ate at a snail's pace. Li Zhifeng was

focused on ripping the bread into pieces for him. You Miao watched him unblinkingly, knowing that perhaps, after this night was over, they would be separated forever.

It was very quiet within the tent, and the only sound was You Miao's chewing. Li Zhifeng never met his eyes. As You Miao ate, the chewing dissolved into sniffles. It was a faint sound, yet clearly audible. The rims of his eyes were bright red as tears brimmed in his eyes, but never once did Li Zhifeng speak up to comfort him, nor did he hold him in his arms as he would've done in the past.

Bitterness was the only flavor choking You Miao's throat as he brokenly stuffed the pieces of bread into his mouth. He was racked with tears, but forced himself not to make a sound.

"I'm done," You Miao eventually said, his voice cracked.

Li Zhifeng silently nodded and began to wolf down the lamb and bread. You Miao took off the jade pendant his mother had left him. The pendant had been exchanging hands between the two of them; it had gone from You Miao to Li Zhifeng that day, once upon a time, when You Miao had picked Li Zhifeng up, and then Li Zhifeng had returned it to him during the exams. It had gone missing when the country fell and You Miao was enslaved, but when Li Zhifeng saved him, the jade pendant was returned to You Miao yet again.

You Miao wrapped the jade pendant around Li Zhifeng's wrist. Li Zhifeng turned his head and put a hand over You Miao's to stop him. Yet You Miao put his other hand over his, and pulled his fingers away.

"You're off on a rescue mission. I worry about your safety," You Miao said.

The rims of Li Zhifeng's eyes turned red, but You Miao didn't wait for him to reject the gesture, nor did he wait for a response, before he got up and left the tent.

The northerly winds were howling as the night fell early. You Miao barely took a step outside and Li Zhifeng had wordlessly come after him.

The bone-biting frigid winds made You Miao shiver and his teeth chatter, but he continued on without looking back.

They walked, one in the front and one following behind, for a long distance. You Miao continuously picked the path with the least number of patrolling guards. Since Li Zhifeng was sumptuously dressed, when they encountered Tartar soldiers every now and then, they would recognize that he was someone of status and bow. When You Miao hiked onto a hill, Li Zhifeng fixed his own clothes before they came to a grand mansion. He said something in a clear voice and the guard hurried inside to make the announcement.

When Li Zhifeng entered, Orgos was kissing and sucking the face of a woman held in his arms. You Miao waited outside the yard, and a short while later, two soldiers dragged out a tattered Li Yan and threw him on the ground. Li Zhifeng emerged soon after with his hands clasped behind his back and stopped, standing tall and straight in the yard.

Orgos's boisterous laughter could be heard from inside the mansion, and a Han who understood Tartar respectfully translated for Li Zhifeng. "The general says if this man has offended Your Highness, then it is fine to beat him dead in the yard. My general will explain it to General Hemetir."

Orgos gave a command, and the soldiers outside raised their clubs and struck down. Li Yan grunted as he attempted to dodge the blows.

Amused, Orgos made a comment, and the Han interpreter said, "My general invites Your Highness Sanado in for a drink."

Li Zhifeng replied stoically, "No. My coming was impudent and I have already disturbed the general. Just let me watch this man get beaten and it'll suffice."

The two soldiers kicked Li Yan around like a ball as they struck him over and over. At the beginning, Li Yan had hugged his arms around his head and tried to dodge the beating. But then he was bludgeoned over the head, which knocked him dumb and unable to utter another grunt. He

crashed to the ground like a dead dog. The beating continued until Li Yan first threw up his dinner, and then started to heave bile.

The sight was hard to bear, but just when You Miao raised his eyes to look at Li Zhifeng, Orgos came out holding a woman. His robes were draped loosely over his body, revealing a taut, muscular body with a chest overgrown with black hair. The woman in his arms was Li Yan's wife, Madam Tang.

"Wait," Li Zhifeng said.

Writhing, Li Yan crawled in the yard.

Tears filled Madam Tang's eyes, and she turned her head away, unable to watch. But Orgos gripped her chin and forced her head back to look at Li Yan's beating.

After a moment of deliberation, Li Zhifeng said, "I want to take this man away to personally discipline him, and avoid dirtying the general's yard."

Orgos grunted and noticed that Madam Tang looked as though she wanted to speak. Li Zhifeng thought for another long while before he said something in broken Tartar. Smiling in understanding, Orgos waved disdainfully, motioning that Li Zhifeng could take Li Yan away.

Li Zhifeng gave a curt nod. Then, with his hands still clasped behind his back, he left the grounds of the general's mansion. Greatly relieved, You Miao quickly went to pick Li Yan up and took him out of the residence.

There were only two Tartar soldiers watching the horses in the small stable outside the city. The majority of the army's horses were stationed behind the camp, as it was impossible to settle them near the city. The horses here only served the delivery of post, so they were short-run horses. You Miao waited on top of a hill. Li Yan was panting, his hair covered in ice and snow. Shivering, he clutched You Miao's sleeves, his lips quivering.

“What?” You Miao said. “Li Yan? Li Yan!”

“Save…your saozi,” Li Yan gasped weakly next to You Miao’s ear. “Don’t bother with me, save her…”

“Impossible,” You Miao replied in a low voice. “You saw how it was back there. She’s beyond saving now.”

He still remembered Madam Tang’s anguished look when they left. But no matter how capable Li Zhifeng was, he couldn’t save her. The reason he could get Li Yan at all was precisely because Li Yan’s wife as in Orgos’s hands. If they recklessly went back now to ask for her, they could very well provoke Orgos’s ire. Li Zhifeng had done enough for them; You Miao couldn’t put him in danger.

“Save your saozi, we can’t leave her here by herself…” Li Yan begged. “My life doesn’t matter…”

“No!” You Miao clenched his teeth. “Do you know how much it took Li Zhifeng to get you out? One misstep now and he’ll be implicated and die here!”

Li Zhifeng gave a sharp whistle from the bottom of the hill just as they were talking, and dropping his conversation with Li Yan, You Miao dragged Li Yan to slip down the hill. Li Zhifeng had already dealt with the Tartar guard; the dead body wasn’t even bleeding as it lay limply on the snowy ground—probably dead, having had his neck wrung. You Miao swiftly stripped the dead soldier and dressed Li Yan in his clothes. He then untied the horses’ reins and assisted the dying Li Yan to the wall, letting him lean against a pole. He pulled the woolen cap down to block his eyes, crossed his arms over his chest, and stuffed a dagger in his hand.

“May Heaven watch over Tianqi…” You Miao’s voice trembled. “Li Yan, pray for your own good fortune now. I’m off to rescue the others. I’ll be right back.”

Li Yan was leaning next to the campfire, and with tears in his eyes, he pulled himself together somewhat.

“You keep it…keep it…” Li Yan pushed the dagger back into You Miao’s hands and mumbled, “If you see your saozi, find a way to break her out…”

You Miao and Li Zhifeng left, hurrying to where the others were detained. In the dead of the night, You Miao abruptly asked, “Are you coming with us?”

Li Zhifeng looked at You Miao. “I’ll escort you to Lan Pass.”

You Miao gave a quiet nod. Li Zhifeng seemed to want to say something more, but You Miao asked, “Where will you go after? Back to Quanrong territory?”

“The Quanrong don’t have territories,” Li Zhifeng replied. “You’ve forgotten again.”

You Miao remembered now; this was the umpteenth time Li Zhifeng had reminded him that the Quanrong had no homes. But he was so overwhelmingly sad that whenever he remembered, it was as if someone was forcibly ripping away a piece of his heart. So he kept trying to fill the air with words, to ramble on so mindlessly that even he himself didn’t know what exactly it was he wanted to say anymore.

The valley where the prison was located was a drafty area, and the cold winds there were miserable; cutting deeply as a knife. You Miao pulled out his exceptionally sharp dagger, yet there was no one guarding the prison cells outside—it was honestly too cold, and all the Tartar soldiers had left, leaving behind a bare prison room with a rusty lock on the door.

“Ziqian!” someone cried out from the iron-barred window as soon as You Miao approached.

You Miao quickly gestured for them not to speak as he ran to the door and applied force. Li Zhifeng went over and used his shoulder to push against it, and the two managed to pry the lock open with their combined powers. The prison clinked and clanked with sound of metal as the shackled youths came stumbling out. One…two… You Miao counted as each one passed him. In the end, there were a total of sixteen young men.

“Are there enough horses?” was Ping Xi’s first question when he came out.

Qian Hui asked, “Where’s Li Yan? He told us to escape first, but what about him?”

Lin Luoyang said, “We’ll have to think of a way to remove the shackles first, or else we’ll be too noisy.”

“Stop talking, all of you!” You Miao hissed.

He bent down and tried his dagger on Ping Xi first, but the iron shackle around his feet was too thick—it was pig iron too, and spotty with rust. No matter the sharpness of the dagger, it would be impossible to cut through the iron hoops. Without a choice, You Miao stuck the dagger’s tip into the chain between the shackles and broke off a ring by prying into a crack to temporarily solve the problem of movement.

“We’ll leave the handcuffs for now. Quick! Next!”

You Miao directed the next person to come over, and with one knee to the ground, he picked out the ankle shackles of each and every one of the young men. It didn’t take long before everyone was freed of their feet binds. Then, Li Zhifeng went ahead to scout the road while You Miao took the sixteen young men with him, clinking and clanking as they ran.

Dark clouds concealed the moon and the wild winds hid the shackles’ noise. You Miao’s heart was pounding like crazy in his chest; he was nearly halfway to achieving his goal, and coming ever closer to reaching it.

Outside the stable, Li Zhifeng skimmed the hills and said to You Miao, “I’m off. Be careful not to let the warhorses make noise and attract attention. Run first if there’s any sign of danger. Every person escaped is a person saved. Don’t wait for me.”

You Miao subconsciously nodded and Li Zhifeng took off. Like a lone wolf in the snowy night, he leapt up onto the cliff and scaled with his bare hands, avoiding the path in spectacular fashion. Higher and higher he

climbed until finally, when he reached the top, he jumped and landed in the stone fortress at the top of the hill. The Han women that Hemetir had captured were all imprisoned there.

When You Miao and the others reached the stables, Li Yan was still there. The snow falling this night was truly too heavy—there was basically no one standing watch, they were all slacking off somewhere. No one would imagine that the captives would escape on a night like this, especially in this frozen, snowy weather—how far could they run? They'd die sooner or later on the road.

"Li Yan!" the young men cried as they ran toward him.

You Miao immediately instructed, "Don't lose yourselves! Seal the horses' mouths first! Get in order! Everyone to a horse!"

There were twenty-two horses in the stable, and they stirred when the young men saddled them but didn't kick up a fuss. You Miao went around to inspect their rumps; they had all once belonged to the defense army previously stationed in Da'an, so they were likely taken after the Tartars had besieged the city. It was perfect, actually—old hands are good guides, old horses recognize the way. As long as the group could hang on, then these horses would for sure be able to take them back to the Central Plains.

"Everyone, mount your horses."

After You Miao had sorted through the horses, he urged the group to hop on. Li Yan, however, only gave a stifled grunt.

Frowning, You Miao asked, "What's wrong?"

"His leg is broken!" Qian Hui replied instead.

Alarmed, You Miao quickly went to check on Li Yan. Li Yan's face was as pale as the snow, and there was a bit of blood trailing from the corner of his lips. Several of the guys alighted their horses and formed a circle around Li Yan, looking at his leg.

“When did you break it?” You Miao questioned. “Wasn’t it fine just earlier?”

Li Yan smiled wryly. “It’s fine. Shaonan, you take me.”

“We’ll have to set the bone for him,” Ping Xi said. “Otherwise, that leg will be busted for good. Who here knows how to set bones?”

“How do we set it without ointment or powder?”

“I’ll do it…”

The young man who spoke up and approached was someone You Miao recognized as the nephew of an Imperial Physician. As the bones were set, Li Yan writhed in pain, his eyes rolled back.

“This leg was broken by a beating. Who’d do something like this?” the youth wondered.

Breathing harsh and quick, Li Yan bit his lips so hard that he bled. The group patted him on the shoulder, giving him an encouraging, “You’re the man.”

You Miao looked up and locked eyes with Li Yan, and then understanding dawned on him. Li Yan’s leg was already broken back when they were leaving Orgos’s mansion, but because he worried he’d be a burden to You Miao, he endured it and refrained from saying anything.

Lin Luoyang came over with a broken piece of wooden plank to use as a splint for Li Yan. You Miao then carried Li Yan to the horse and seated him behind him.

Li Yan looked back, time and again, and asked, “Did Li Zhifeng go off to run another rescue?”

You Miao nodded.

“To save your saozi?” Li Yan pressed.

You Miao didn't dare tell him that it was impossible to save Madam Tang at this point—and that instead of her, You Miao would rather Li Zhifeng be the one who'd come back safe and sound. However, the young men were starting grow agitated, and they started questioning.

"Let's go already!"

"If we don't leave now, we'll be discovered!"

"Who are we waiting for?"

You Miao furrowed his brows and barked, "For your wives!"

The group was shocked into silence. But moments later, another young man asked, "How far can we run if we have them with us?"

You Miao whipped his head around and recognized the one who'd spoken to be the son of the Crown Prince's tutor, a man named Xu Ruri.

"So you're throwing your wife away just because you might not be able to run far?" You Miao rebuked.

Everyone sighed softly. Another man spoke up. "Ziqian, it's not that we're ungrateful. But if the Tartars catch up, none of us will survive. Why don't we go back ourselves first, then ransom them later? It's not like the Tartars are detaining us for anything besides money and silk."

"I'm afraid the moment we leave, there'll be no more reason for them be kept alive. Women sure are tougher than men these days," You Miao said scathingly.

The men's faces all darkened at You Miao's comment.

"Shut up, You Ziqian," Li Yan hissed. "Don't say that. None of us have it easy."

"You don't want your wives? Well, I'm still waiting for mine. So just sit tight," You Miao said. "Man may scheme, but success depends on the heavens—if those crooks in heaven really do have eyes, then they'll definitely grant us a smooth return to Jiangnan. If the heavens want to end

the Hans, then it doesn't matter where we run; all we'd be doing is returning to a conquered country to be slaves."

His words seemed to have imperceptibly pumped everyone with encouragement, and no one spoke again in the remaining time. The winds had died a little, and the snow fluttered gently down. Flake by flake, the time flew past, and daybreak was nearing. You Miao was burning with worry, but he didn't show it outwardly.

At last, there was the sound of ruffled snow, followed by a girl sliding down along the hill. The movement startled everyone as the girl ran toward the horses, crying and confused.

"Feishuang!" Ping Xi exclaimed.

"Mom is gone—!"

The girl was indeed Ping Xi's newly wedded wife, and she hugged him as she wept. Pain and anguish appeared in the eyes of all the men present. Just then, another girl slid down.

"Second Princess!" someone exclaimed.

The women detained by the Tartars in the stone fortress were coming down the hill one after the other and embracing the men as they landed. There were reunited siblings and lovers, and they all cried in joy. The last to appear at the top of the hill was a blood-soaked Li Zhifeng with an iron sword in his grip.

Panting softly, he spoke before You Miao had a chance to ask questions. "Enemy blood."

"How many did you kill?" You Miao asked.

"Forty-seven," Li Zhifeng replied. "They'll be alerted at daybreak. We must leave immediately."

Everyone was stunned speechless.

You Miao urged, "Come on, let's get out of here."

Li Zhifeng hopped onto a horse. Every young man took on a girl, and their horses followed You Miao's lead as they rapidly plunged into the snowstorm.

" *Hiyah* !"

" *Hiyah* !"

Their voices spread far into the distance of the snowy world. You Miao knew that every second counted right now; that every minute they stole on the run was every minute gained for a chance at survival. Their only hope now was that the sky wouldn't lighten.

The snow stopped and the winds ceased—this wasn't a good sign. As opposed to the biting cold, You Miao would rather the heavens have made the snow fall harder. Snow would've covered their tracks, making it harder for the Tartars to track them, and it would've also made capture all the more difficult. No one spoke on the way, each riding on with their hearts heavy and minds laden.

The sun had risen, lighting the snowy fields with a golden glow. They had run roughly fifty miles away from Da'an by now, and some were having trouble holding it together. You Miao didn't allow anyone to rest, however.

He turned his head and yelled, "Keep running! We can't stop!"

The youths were all falling asleep on their horses, yet it was precisely right after overcoming danger that people would fall prey to the lure of easing up. You Miao knew that this was a critical point; one when they were truly at the crossroads of life and death. The Tartars who had risen in the morning must have discovered the guards Li Zhifeng had killed, and would have begun their pursuit out of Da'an.

And as for Li Zhifeng… You Miao couldn't help but turn his head to look at him.

Li Zhifeng was spurring the horse on, driving it to the ground. Several times, he would run side by side with the warhorse You Miao and

Li Yan rode, but he always moved away the moment they touched.

You Miao shouted to him, “Are you heading back to Da’an still?”

The wind blew past, howling in their ears, and Li Zhifeng only gave You Miao a glance.

“Li Zhifeng—!” You Miao cried.

“What?” Li Zhifeng responded.

“What will you do?”

“It’s the Lan Pass!” a youth at the very front of the group yelled.

The Lan Pass was visible in the distance, but it was farther away than it appeared. It would take at least four more hours to reach it. Without realizing, they had already run for half a day. As the sun reached mid-sky, it shone so bright upon the snow that it was blinding. The group had gone on for nearly twenty hours without eating anything.

Abruptly, Li Zhifeng pulled the horse to a halt. The warhorse cried out, immediately bleeding at the mouth from the powerful force.

The youths stopped their horses as well, but they weren’t quite sure what was happening. They looked at Li Zhifeng, who was a dozen yards away.

Li Zhifeng looked up, his eyes moving far into the distance. You Miao followed suit, only to hear the cry of a hawk. There were two small dots circling high in the sky above.

“Tartar scouting hawks.” Li Zhifeng took the longbow carried on his back and raised it.

The group held their breaths as they watched him. Li Zhifeng squinted, seeming to be estimating the distance between him and the birds. But in the end, he shook his head, resigned.

Li Yan was fading, so You Miao had no choice but to let the group rest for a moment on the spot. The young men helped Li Yan down from the horse. Li Yan's broken leg had turned into a purplish blue from internal bleeding.

Li Zhifeng trotted his horse over and stopped next to You Miao, drawing their horses close. Soon after, You Miao circled his arms around Li Zhifeng's neck, hugging him close, and pulled him in for a heated kiss. A long, long time passed—so long that the fallen snowflakes upon their brows were melted by their hot breaths and rolled down as drops of water, wetting their faces.

When at last Li Zhifeng broke away, he sighed the words, "Go on. I'll guard Lan Pass for you and draw them away."

"Don't die," You Miao said.

"I won't," Li Zhifeng replied. "Don't worry. I'll write you letters in the future."

There was a lump in You Miao's throat, choking him with agony and rendering him unable to utter a single word. He breathed in deeply a few times, but it failed to calm him down. He was so miserable that he was shaking. Countless times, he had imagined this parting with Li Zhifeng—but never had he thought that it'd be at a time like this, that it'd be at a place like this.

Snow was falling again, fine and dense as it covered the heavens and the earth. It brought with it the breath of the mountains and the rivers, pulling the entire Lan Pass into its embrace.

"Mount the horses," You Miao instructed the others with a cracked voice.

The youths did as they were told, and You Miao turned his horse, taking a few steps in the direction of the Lan Pass. Unable to stop himself, he looked back once more. The lone figure of Li Zhifeng was there on the horse, quietly gazing at him.

Millions of words, memories of the past both happy and sad—it had only been four years, yet it was as though an entire lifetime was in that gaze.

You Miao re-alighted his horse and took three steps toward Li Zhifeng. Li Zhifeng seemed to stir, but You Miao suddenly bent down and dropped to his knees in the snow.

"Words cannot express my gratitude, Sanado," You Miao said. "This is the last we shall meet. But no matter where we are in the world, I will always wish you well in my heart."

The youths all dismounted their horses and joined You Miao, taking his lead and kneeling down.

You Miao kowtowed once.

Finally affected, Li Zhifeng twisted his head away and soundlessly choked up, his eyes red.

At the second kowtow, the others followed and prostrated as well.

And then a third kowtow. With red eyes, You Miao rose to his feet and mounted his horse, spurring it on with a cry.

" *Hiyah* !"

Twenty-two steeds dashed away into the distance, leaving behind flying clouds of snow as they vanished into the vast and boundless world.

Li Zhifeng let out a long wolf howl in a voice that was laced with forbearance, pain, and anguish.

You Miao drove his horse on hard, leading everyone to charge into the Lan Pass as his hot tears flew in the frigid winds. When he heard Li Zhifeng's cry, he inhaled deeply and screamed in a hoarse voice with all his strength in an attempt to expel all of the grief deep inside.

For a long time, their voices resounded and echoed across the Lan Pass.

Li Zhifeng ran his horse to the higher grounds of a hill, nocked his arrow onto his bow, and loosed a shot. The scouting hawks shrieked as they fell into the bushes.

A squad of elite Tartar riders had pursued them to the foot of the hill, and the commanding soldier shouted in front of the Lan Pass, “Sanado! I know you’re hiding here! Give us the Han slaves you let loose and General Hemetir will allow you to die with dignity! Or else we will slaughter *all* of Quanrong—and that’s a promise!”

Li Zhifeng let another arrow fly. It pierced through that Tartar’s skull, and the man cried out and fell off his horse.

[Chapter 35]

It was deep into the night before You Miao and gang finally found a place to rest outside the Lan Pass. After an entire day and night, the horses had been run ragged. Even if the people could endure it, the horses couldn't, so the group had to make a stop.

They found a cave in a valley, the entrance of which was hidden by a giant boulder directly in front. They also piled branches and various other junk to add to the cover, and the resulting mound blocked out the light. The horses were tethered nearby the cave, grazing on the withered weeds under the trees.

You Miao stared at the flickering campfire. Ever since his farewell to Li Zhifeng, he had become so quiet it was as if he'd turned into someone completely different.

It was very cramped inside the cave. The women were huddled at the innermost part, while the men guarded the entrance. Li Yan was lying next to the fire, silent as his tears flowed. But he soon broke down into weeping, and the sound of his wracked sobs grew louder until he at last let out an agonized wail.

Ping Xi, the one on watch for the night, immediately came over in a panic. "Keep it down!"

You Miao went over as well and checked on Li Yan. His eyes were filled with guilt and pain, and tightly clutched the jade bracelet Liu Shaling had left him. Everyone knew why he was crying, but no one dared to talk about it—he wept for Madam Tang, over his own uselessness, that he couldn't even protect his own wife and had allowed her to be humiliated after the country fell. He wept over the fact that everyone had escaped except for his wife, who remained in the enemy's camp. When the Tartars discovered that they had escaped… You Miao didn't dare to imagine what they'd do to Madam Tang.

He held Li Yan up and let him lean on his shoulder. Li Yan only stared blankly at the campfire.

“ *Oh, trodden are the waterside orchids, thus the path diminishes …*” he murmured.

“ *Oh, deep is the river, maple leaves upon the surface…* ” Qian Hui joined in, and all of a sudden, it was as if the song had set off the youths’ grief and longing. They began to sing Song Yu’s “Summoning of the Soul, [6]” their hoarse voices making a low hum.

“ *Oh, thousands of miles do the eyes see, but hurt is the budding love; oh, will the soul return, grieve over Jiangnan…* ” You Miao sang along with the others.

No one mentioned the road ahead, and no one talked of events past. After the song was finished, they divvied up and ate the last bit of dough bread You Miao had brought with him before they each fell into deep slumber, conserving their strength. After all, they still had to run for their lives the next day, and no one knew how far they had to travel before it was all over.

Past the Yellow River, past Jiangjun Ridge, past the Yangtze River… Was the charming Jiangnan and its bedazzling pleasures still the same? In another two months, the peach trees would be in bloom, and it’d be time for Riverwave Estate to sow rapeseed. Yet the one who had been by his side every year, Li Zhifeng, would remain in the north—never to return again to Jiangnan.

In You Miao’s dreams, he’d returned to Riverwave Estate amidst ten miles of peach blossoms and gently swaying willow catkins. But it was then that Ping Xi, with bloodshot eyes, roused him.

“Ziqian, wake up! I suspect there are Tartars nearby!”

You Miao jolted awake in alarm and stumbled to his feet, following Ping Xi out of the cave. They clambered using all four limbs to a high area. There, he saw a long line of torchlight in the far distance that resembled a dragon.

“It’s not the Tartars.” You Miao could tell at a glance. “The Tartars wouldn’t move about the mountains at night. It’s possibly the Barbarians.

And look…" You Miao pointed to another place. "It's also possible that they're not looking for us; the direction is wrong. That's the southwest side of the Qin Ridge."

"Are there Hans here still?" Ping Xi wondered.

You Miao shook his head. He didn't know for sure, but regardless, they must not expose themselves right now. Otherwise, they'd be causing trouble for themselves for no reason. He and Ping Xi briefly discussed the situation—since they had both worked in civil positions for the military before, they could more or less gauge the Barbarians' trajectory. They decided not to act rashly, lest they alert the enemy. They didn't leave the cave, either, and only extinguished the campfire outside it.

The people inside the cave seemed to have sensed something was going on, but no one tried to raise any questions. Early next morning, You Miao told the others to continue their trek, as he didn't dare to waste any more time. Some of them had caught colds and had started to grow feverish, and some had even passed out. He let the unconscious ones lie on the backs of the horses and had them trail at the end of the group.

Crossing the Qin Ridge would take a full three days' time, but the group's health was extremely poor. With the weather this cold, they might have to delay even more. And the worst part was, they didn't have any more food. They had to source food today, or else no one would be able to hang on. Hunger, pursuers, cold, pain and sickness—this was the most despairing of times.

As the sun rolled to mid-sky, You Miao was both starving and lethargic, with dizziness coming in waves. The horses were lined in a row as they slowly trudged onward on the cliffside stone path. Every so often, a small pebble would fall over the edge and plunge into the infinite abyss below.

Li Yan's eyes were sunken with dark circles colored beneath, and the other young men were so thin they were skin and bones. Some had even started to run high fevers and mumble nonsense. Around noon, You Miao

stopped the group at a terrace and instructed them to eat a few bites of snow and rest.

"Lord You." A woman approached him and gave a small curtsy. Her beauty was undiminished by how dirty she was.

Standing in the biting winds, You Miao was looking down the mountain at the signs of trees having been cut down in the faraway valley below. He turned his head at her call.

"Madam Huang?"

He recognized the woman: she was the wife of Huang Yuan, a great scholar of the current court. Despite the man's old age, his wife was only twenty-two, and was charming and beautiful. Huang Yuan had died when the capital fell, but fortunately, the madam survived.

Madam Huang said, "The sisters have some things we wish to say. After much deliberation, I was chosen to come forth to speak with you, Lord You."

Thinking something had happened to them, You Miao quickly reassured, "If it's to tell the men to take off without you ladies, then forget it. After having fled this far, there's no way I'd abandon you—"

"No, my lord has misunderstood," Madam Huang quickly stopped him. With a smile, she said, "I've come to thank my lord for saving our lives. Lord You, you might be young, but you are an outstanding official of the imperial court. It's a blessing from Heaven that Tianqi has you."

You Miao immediately declined the compliment, but Madam Huang continued, "That day, your guard killed dozens of men in order to rescue us. An incomparably valiant man. Her Highness the Second Princess questioned his motives, but he only said that it was at your command. We all know that Lord You lost a loyal servant with the parting at Lan Pass yesterday, and is internally suffering. Yet joys and sorrows, partings and reunions, are a fact of life. Pray my lord, for the sake of Tianqi, and for the greatness of the Midlands…do contain your grief and do not allow sorrow to injure your health."

You Miao understood now. Despite it not showing on his face, Madam Huang and the other women had noticed he was heartbroken. They were worried it would build up to illness, which was why she had come to console him.

You Miao made a noise of acknowledgment and nodded. “Thanks, Madam Huang.”

When he looked up, he saw the pale-lipped women huddling together for warmth by the campfire sneaking looks his way, their faces concerned. He was, all of a sudden, touched.

“Let us all support each other. Everything will be fine once we get back. We’ve made it this far; we can’t collapse on the road now.”

Just then, there was suddenly the sound of fighting from down the mountain. Terrible screams filled the air, and everyone was instantly alerted.

“Don’t anyone panic!” You Miao cried immediately. “Everyone, stay here. A few of you, come with me!”

Just as You Miao took his bow and arrows from the warhorse and picked up the quiver, someone spoke up.

“Ziqian, we should be running away! We can’t stick around here!”

“No. Let’s check out the situation first,” You Miao argued. “What if it’s a Han troop fighting the Barbarians?”

You Miao mounted the horse and rode down the mountain, and he was able to see the situation clearer halfway. As he had expected, it was a Han squad fighting the Barbarians—by the looks of their battle attire, they appeared to be the Xianbei tribe. He couldn’t tell which division the Han soldiers belonged to, however. Ping Xi was about to yell, but You Miao stopped him. The two clashing sides were matched equally in force; You Miao counted five, ten, fifteen… There were twenty Xianbei soldiers and twenty Han shooting at each other over a small stream.

It didn’t take long before the Han soldiers looked as if they couldn’t keep up, and turned to flee. But as they fled, several of them were shot dead and the troop was thrown into chaos. In the end, the ran along the edge of the forest—in You Miao’s direction.

“What do we do? They’ve got large numbers,” Ping Xi asked with a quivering voice.

“Go back and call over another four men,” You Miao said. “We’ll flank them from both sides and kill them!”

Ping Xi was shaken by the idea, but You Miao didn’t give him the time to think. He grabbed him by the collar and yelled, “Or else it’ll be death for all of us! Even if we don’t get killed by the Xianbei, we’ll still die of starvation!”

Stunned by this cry, Ping Xi turned around right then and there to pick out the men, and they made preparations with You Miao inside the woods.

As they nocked arrows onto their bows, You Miao said in a low voice, “Don’t be afraid to die. When I give the order in a minute, everyone shoot. When I charge, follow me. Every single kill counts.”

The small party of young men nodded, their hands clammy with cold sweat. You Miao knew this would be the first time they’d ever entered the battlefield, so a little fear couldn’t be helped—but there was no room to consider all that at a time like this.

Once the Han soldiers approached, You Miao ordered in a low voice, “Shoot!”

The six of them let fly their arrows simultaneously, shooting down the running Xianbei soldiers.

You Miao ordered again, “Arrows at the ready!”

They nocked their arrows again.

“Shoot!”

Everyone released their bowstrings and let fly a second round of arrows. They shot down three Xianbei.

“Arrows at the ready—!” You Miao cried again, and they quickly nocked arrows again.

The Xianbei had discovered their ambush at this point, and they immediately turned back around to search for them.

“Kill—!” You Miao furiously roared.

The six young men cried out and charged from the protection of the trees. The Xianbei soldiers had now passed the ambush area, and the Han soldiers ahead yelled in return.

“Reinforcements have come! Turn around and follow me to charge —!”

To You Miao’s shock, that was Zhao Chao’s voice. He could feel his blood freeze for a second before he yelled back, “ *Zhao Chao* —!”

Morale surged at once, and You Miao cried, “Charge—!”

The two Han groups forced the Xianbei to the middle and both struck at the same time. The Xianbei had thought the ambush was coming from a battalion, never realizing that there were only six men—and since You Miao had shot down their men earlier, thoughts of defeat had filled their minds. Thus, they were completely annihilated.

The battle was decided within moments. The last five remaining Xianbei soldiers fell to their knees and begged for mercy.

You Miao rolled off the horse. Shakily, Zhao Chao took a step forward. He was covered in blood and grime, his eyes bloodshot. He looked like a god of war who had just crawled from the depths of hell. His eyes were dazed, yet fully transfixed on You Miao. Then, he threw his helmet to the side and ran toward him. You Miao charged over too, and the two crashed together in a fierce hug, falling to the ground next to the stream.

“I’m back…” You Miao swallowed his tears, hugging Zhao Chao as he choked down sobs.

“Thank goodness you’re back…” Zhao Chao murmured. “I’ve finally found you…”

A quarter of an hour later, the Tianqi soldiers slit the throats of the Barbarian captives and threw their bodies into the river. The escapees finally sighed a breath of relief and were led down the mountain by Zhao Chao’s men. Meanwhile, You Miao and Zhao Chao shared with each other all that had transpired since their separation.

You Miao learned that Zhao Chao had never returned to the Central Plains after they made their escape at the Lan Pass, and had instead been roaming the foot of the Qin Ridge all this time in search of You Miao’s whereabouts. Along the way, they had run into a battalion of fleeing soldiers. In the powerful name of the Third Prince, Zhao Chao had subdued the defeated army and rearranged their formation before passing control to Qin Shaonan, ordering them to retreat down the official road while Zhao Chao took twenty men to continue the search for the captured You Miao. The territories from Ba Mountain of Qin Ridge all the way to the Liang Pass had fallen into enemy hands by then, becoming Barbarian land. They’d encountered Barbarians everywhere.

“I can’t believe you got taken to Da’an…” Zhao Chao was in disbelief after he learned of the dangers You Miao had lived through. “And here I thought those Tartars were runaways.”

You Miao told Zhao Chao about what had happened in Da’an, and Zhao Chao consoled him. “It’s okay. You’ll meet again someday.”

You Miao no longer held much hope of reuniting with Li Zhifeng, and only responded with a wry smile. “Maybe.”

“As long as we can drive the Tartars out and connect with the Quanrong, reunion won’t be that hard,” Zhao Chao tried.

You Miao only gave a small “mn.” Zhao Chao patted his shoulder before saying in a low voice, “Pull yourself together. We’re not out of

danger yet; we can't drop our guard."

You Miao realized that Zhao Chao was right—after all, they weren't back in the Central Plains yet. But convening with Zhao Chao and company finally allowed him to breathe in relief and relax, to bring him down from the edge, and give him a shoulder to lean on.

Zhao Chao checked on the escapees, and hugged and wept bitterly with the Second Princess. That night, they built camp right at the foot of Qin Ridge. There was already a shortage of horses, so the most Zhao Chao could offer was food supplies.

The northerly winds blew furiously all that night, but for the first time in a long time, You Miao was able to sleep soundly, finally passing out from exhaustion from where he lay beside Zhao Chao. However, they were roused by the sentry just as the day broke the next morning.

"Your Highness! There are pursuers!" reported a soldier the moment he walked in. "It's the Tartars!"

"What's going on?" Zhao Chao was alarmed. "The Tartars shouldn't be anywhere west of the Lan Pass…"

You Miao had only just opened his eyes and immediately came around. "It's us they're chasing! Let's get outta here!"

Once more, everyone mounted their horses and charged out of the campground, finding the official highway as they dashed southward. You Miao looked up; there were no signs of any scouting hawks in the gloomy sky… It seemed the Tartars were tracking them by footprints. They had only just crossed the Lan Pass, and Zhao Chao didn't dare use the official road lest they run into Barbarians.

Based on the information provided by the defeated army, the Barbarians and the Tartars had already divided the territories: the vast land west of Qin Ridge and the areas they had passed through had been given to the Five Barbarian Tribes to partition, and everything east of Da'an was claimed by the Tartars. Danger lurked everywhere, yet Zhao Chao had the guts to take them all across Barbarian domain.

As they traveled further and further south, snow and ice melted. Spring had already arrived here, as the earth burgeoned with tender green sprouts. As long as they could cross the Yangtze, they would make it back to Tianqi territory. From what they knew, neither the Barbarians nor the Tartars had crossed the river yet; on the southern shore, Tianqi remained struggling at death's door.

The road to escape was a hair-raising one; many times, they had to hide in abandoned villages. Zhao Chao would tell everyone to stay silent, then cover the campfire and ride out with three unoccupied horses to lead the Tartars away. Once, the Tartars had charged right past them in pursuit of Zhao Chao, but he always managed to shake them off before reconvening with the rest of them.

[Text Break]

It was the first year of Nanzhao, the twenty-third of the second month. You Miao had already lost track of time, feeling only numbness as they exhausted themselves running for their lives. On this day, they had made it to the east-most plains of West Liang. The bloody sunset had set the entire plains alight, and at the end of the horizon, Tartar pursuers appeared.

The group halted their horses before a small river. Spring had only just arrived and the river flowed with melted snow; the water rushing downstream carried with it chunks of broken ice. The women were two to a horse as they crossed the river while Zhao Chao, You Miao, and the others stayed by the shore, gazing at the distance.

"Do we fight?" Zhao Chao's hand that gripped his sword was shaking.

Everyone's face dropped, and You Miao shook his head. "We'll lose. There's more of them than us."

Counting You Miao and Zhao Chao, they only had fifteen men in their party who could fight—the others were too weak to be included. Yet there were at least fifty Tartars, and they were soldiers who had surprisingly persisted in their pursuit all the way from the Lan Pass.

“We won’t be able to keep running at night,” Zhao Chao said. “The horses are exhausted.”

They had been running nonstop, day and night, for the past several days. The warhorses were nearing their physical limits—when they crossed the river just now, their legs were shaking.

“Are you familiar with the terrain here?” You Miao asked. “Can we take advantage of it?”

Zhao Chao shook his head. “I could try to draw them away completely. You take as many as you can to run away.”

“I think they’ve gotten smarter,” You Miao said. “Look, they’re not even a mile away, but they’re not rushing to attack us because they’ve been tricked too many times before.”

“We have to take care of them all at once,” Zhao Chao said. “Might as well fight with our backs to the water. Protect my sister and the women while they cross the river, then let’s meet our maker and go out with a bang. That way, we men will not have lived in vain.”

“No!” You Miao decidedly opposed the idea. “Don’t let anyone give up until the very last second.”

Ping Xi, who had gone on ahead to scout and escort the women to cross the river, galloped back on his horse. “I found a rundown temple ahead.”

Zhao Chao and You Miao exchanged a look, plans forming in their heads.

“We’ll lie low in the rundown temple,” Zhao Chao said. “We still have arrows, since we barely wasted any on the road.”

You Miao had the same idea, and said, “I’ll take some men with me to organize the ambush, and you take a few with you to wait in the temple backyard. Let’s set up another trap—we’ll pretend we’ve started fighting among ourselves.”

“That’s a great idea!” Zhao Chao immediately said. “Let’s split to set this up, and give it our best shot. Let’s capture them all in one go.”

Fifteen versus fifty.

You Miao didn’t have the guts to challenge the Tartars head-on—when it came to physical strength, the Han were no match for the Tartars, who trained as they roamed the northlands. However, there can never be too much subterfuge in war—the Tartars didn’t have their brains.

War was only a game of deception. You still won even if the enemy was defeated or killed by trickery alone.

The terrain ahead consisted of undulating hills, and they paid careful attention to it as they hiked the road, which was thick with woods on either side—easy for setting up an ambush.

“I’ll pull a horse-tripping cable here and have five archers lie low nearby,” You Miao said.

“Not bad,” Zhao Chao said. “Who will go to them and feign surrender?”

“I’ll go,” You Miao said, nominating himself.

Zhao Chao’s face immediately fell. “No! Let Li Yan go—he’s injured, so it’ll be easier for the Tartars to believe it.”

Someone from up the hill shouted just then, “Your Highness! Come quick and see!”

You Miao and Zhao Chao hiked onto higher ground. Night was falling, and the thinning twilight upon the horizon spilled its purpling hue across the mountain range. Near the small river they had recently crossed, the Tartars were fighting an unknown force; some were already dead and their bodies had been dumped in the river, dying the water a dark color.

“Probably Barbarian pursuers,” Zhao Chao said. “Have you noticed? There were at least a hundred Tartars chasing us at the beginning,

but their numbers dwindled along the way. They were likely killed by Barbarians."

You Miao furrowed his brows. "Don't the Tartars and the Barbarians have an alliance?"

"None of the relationships between the northern tribes are sturdy; there are feuds among them. With so much back and forth killing, it's hard to keep score."

"Should we go give them a hand?" You Miao asked.

"Don't," Zhao Chao replied. "It definitely won't be any better if we fall into the Barbarians' hands. Let's wait and see. Who knows, maybe we won't need to fight? Look! Another one's down!"

They watched for another while, but it eventually got dark enough that they couldn't tell which side was doing the killing, nor could they see much of the actual battle. At last the night fell and a myriad of stars rose into the sky, and nothing more could be seen.

"How many of them were left in the end?" You Miao asked.

"Less than twenty," Zhao Chao replied. "I lost count. This is great! Now we have a good chance of winning!"

"And here I was hoping they'd run away," You Miao muttered. "Welp…I guess we fight."

After pursuing them all this way, it would be impossible that the Tartars would give up now. Zhao Chao and You Miao briefly talked over their earlier plans and decided to cancel them. Instead, they told everyone to rest in the rundown temple for the time being and start the fire for the night while Zhao Chao went to plant archers along the only road that led to the temple.

Their food had already been depleted and the weather was gloomy and chilly with the cold spell of spring. The youths were all curled up by the fire, shivering.

When You Miao sat down, he noticed that Li Yan was gone. “Where’s Li Yan?”

“Went to dig rat holes,” someone answered him. “To find something to eat.”

Yu Miao waited for a very, very long time, but Zhao Chao’s signal never came. Maybe the Tartars wouldn’t hike the hills tonight. He rested against the wall in the corner, his stomach growling incessantly with hunger. They had been running for their lives for many consecutive days with no time to hunt. He’d starved for nearly twenty-four hours, and was on the verge of collapse.

Finally, Zhao Chao came back. Stinking of a foul odor, he chucked his helmet and huffed a relieved breath. “I don’t think any more are coming tonight. I left two men to stand watch, so let’s sleep first.”

You Miao nodded, thinking about finding some tree bark to eat so he’d have the energy to move the next day. But he was both starving and cold, and didn’t want to move… *Forget it, this is fine* , he thought.

Halfway through the night, he detected a faint aroma—several of the young men were huddled together stewing something in a broken bowl. It was fine when there was nothing to eat, but now that there was something smelling good, You Miao felt like he was going to die.

Li Yan’s voice came a moment later. “This is for Your Highness.”

A bowl of gruel was passed over, and after taking a glance at it, Zhao Chao asked, “Where’d the rice come from?”

“Official Li dug it out of a rat’s nest,” someone answered.

Zhao Chao took the bowl. Of the thirty people present, there was only this bowl of food, and he passed it to You Miao. “Come, eat. Fill your stomach so there’s energy to kill.”

You Miao swallowed nonstop as he took the bowl, saliva building in his mouth. With everyone staring, he had no choice but to take a small

sip — yet as soon as the gruel entered his mouth, he forgot everything in the world and was instantly alive again as he wolfed down nearly half of it in large gulps. The warm gruel passing down his throat felt like resurrection. You Miao thought that he probably hadn't tasted anything more delicious in years.

He passed the half-emptied bowl back to Zhao Chao, who only shook his head, patted his hand, and motioned for him to look around.

You Miao looked over and saw Li Yan and the others watching them with complicated expressions. When You Miao glanced at them, they twisted their heads away.

"Ziqian," Zhao Chao said in a low voice, "remember this."

"What?" You Miao asked blankly.

"You're the only one I'm genuine to," Zhao Chao said.

You Miao was shaken. Zhao Chao patted him on the shoulder and rose to his feet.

"I'll go see if I can hunt down a rabbit to bring back."

As Zhao Chao left, You Miao came to realize the underlying meaning of his words. Zhao Zhuo and Zhao Mao had both been captured by the Tartars, and now the only one from the Zhao family who had the authority, who was qualified, was Zhao Chao. If they managed to return to the south and the gentry who'd fled there hadn't yet established a new ruler, then should he not decline his duty, Zhao Chao would be emperor!

What did this imply?

No, with how bleak the warfront was right now, the Jiangnan territories were still in danger. But while on the road, You Miao had also gradually noticed that Li Yan and the others' attitude toward Zhao Chao had changed significantly. Maybe he was the last to realize it. If everyone returned to Jiangnan safe and sound, then You Miao would be someone with none above him except the emperor.

We don't even know yet if we'll survive , You Miao thought derisively. The country, the land, home, and his own Riverwave Estate… If he had to choose, then he'd rather give up Riverwave Estate and his own career in exchange for Li Zhifeng by his side. Yet the north was teeming with devastation, and if he went to the Quanrong with Li Zhifeng now, he'd be deserting his people and his country at the brink of their destruction.

He was willing to give up glory and wealth, but he could not stand by and watch as his own homeland got trampled by the Tartar iron cavalry.

The fire crackled as it burned, and it made You Miao drowsy as he leaned in the corner of the rundown temple. When he woke again, he found Zhao Chao had returned from his patrol. He dropped a few cloth satchels filled with lamb jerky and the leather wineskins the Tartars carried on the ground.

"Eat," Zhao Chao said. "I took a few men to go check things out with me. All the Tartars we killed are next to the river, a whole fifty corpses."

Immediately, the people got to moving. They boiled water and dropped the jerky in, and it didn't take long before the smell of food filled the air. Some were so hungry their sight was going black, and uncaring of anything, they grabbed for the meat directly with their hands to eat. As Zhao Chao chewed, he passed You Miao the wine, gesturing for him to drink. The voices of conversation buzzed around them; they had been on the run for a whole ten days, and it was only now that they finally relaxed.

In the past ten days, they had starved and froze, expecting every next second to be their last. Now, they'd finally escaped hell. This sentiment slowly spread among the group as joy colored everyone's faces, but You Miao only absentmindedly thought as he ate about the things to come when they returned.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang on the backdoor of the temple. The youths immediately panicked and a girl screamed.

"Who's there?!" someone barked.

Zhao Chao swiftly pulled out his sword. Another heavy bang sounded on the door, like something was pouncing on it.

“Don’t be scared!” Zhao Chao barked. “Unsheathe your weapons! There aren’t many enemies left!”

The youths huddled together and stood behind the door, brandishing their weapons and pointing them at the entryway. Another muffled thud sounded from the door, then after that, blood began to seep in from underneath. In that moment, You Miao had a feeling.

It was silent all around.

You Miao took a step forward, tears pouring uncontrollably from his eyes. Then, he took another step, and burst into weeping like a child and rushed to open the door. A tall man covered in blood fell inside, and You Miao caught him, dropping to his knees as he buckled from his weight. He hugged the man around the neck and furiously buried his face in his chest as he was wracked with violent sobs.

It was obvious Li Zhifeng had just went through a tough, deadly fight. He raised one shaking, weak arm and rested it on You Miao’s shoulder. Then he placed a wolf fang in You Miao’s hand and flashed him a tired smile.

That night, Li Zhifeng fell deeply asleep as You Miao wiped away the traces of blood on his face and watched him fixedly with the help of the firelight. Unable to resist, You Miao pressed close to kiss his lips. And in his sleepy haze, Li Zhifeng reached out and embraced him, locking You Miao firmly in his hold. The essence of You Miao’s life had returned at last, and the world was suddenly filled with color once more.

They set off the next day. Li Zhifeng was only exhausted from fighting too hard, so he’d come around after a single good night’s rest and taking in some food and water. You Miao was on edge all night watching over him, but when he woke again at daybreak, it was to the rocking of the horses.

As soon as he opened his eyes, Li Zhifeng said to him, “Everything’s fine now. Sleep.”

Thus, You Miao shuffled and turned to hug Li Zhifeng around the waist before falling back asleep cradled in his arms.

Zhao Chao approached them on his horse. “Back?”

When Li Zhifeng inclined his head, Zhao Chao said, “Thanks for saving them.”

“You’re welcome,” Li Zhifeng replied impassively.

Zhao Chao was at the front leading the way. Slowly, the sun rose and its light spilled over the unbroken chain of mountain peaks as if it was delivering the warmth of spring to all of the earth. The chirping of birds echoed among the trees, and after a long sleep, You Miao stretched and yawned. Li Zhifeng stroked his head.

You Miao didn’t ask why he had come back, and Li Zhifeng didn’t say anything either. It was like they’d only parted for a single night, and now they were together again.

“Were you the one who killed the Tartar troop?” You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng made an affirming noise. “There were too many of them, and they were skilled. I couldn’t defeat all of them on my own, so I had to take them down one by one using stealth. I pursued them from the Lan Pass down to Hanyin.”

You Miao nodded. “They’re obviously formidable if not even you’re a match for them.”

“The hundred men were Hemetir’s personal armed escort,” Li Zhifeng said. “He’s determined to recapture you all.”

You Miao snuggled comfortably as he curled into Li Zhifeng’s arms.

Li Zhifeng asked, “How’s the south? Is home still standing?”

“Apparently, the Barbarians haven’t invaded south of the Yangtze,” You Miao replied. “Let’s hope the heavens give their blessings.”

He didn’t want to leave Li Zhifeng for even a second, and kept playing with his hands, intertwining and interlocking their fingers together. No matter how many times he’d look up, Li Zhifeng would kiss him, warm affection evident in his eyes.

“When we get back, we’ll have a good meal and get some good sleep,” Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao started to laugh. Things were always so simple in Li Zhifeng’s eyes.

[Chapter 36]

This time, there weren't any more Tartar pursuers. Under Zhao Chao's lead, they left West Liang, crossed the Yellow River, and continued cautiously onward, never taking a straightforward path. The majority of the land they had crossed was occupied and they often saw fleeing Han civilians on the roads, as their home villages had been burnt to the ground. After they entered the capital region, they stopped their horses atop Jiangjun Ridge and looked down from up high.

The former capital had already been reduced to wreckage. One of the passing civilians told them that the Tartars had completely sacked the city of its wealth and set off a great fire that blazed for ten days and ten nights, rendering the capital to ash. The Five Barbarian Tribes were currently on the south shore of the Yellow River, entrenched west of the capital in Chengchuan and blocking a major northbound road.

Chengchuan was situated at the intersection of the east, west, and north roads, and had always been a crucial defense city since ancient times. Zhao Chao deliberated for a long time, but in the end, he decided not to take the risk and detoured around the capital region instead, changing the direction of their trek southward to hike the mountains. The group started and stopped intermittently as they entered Barbarian territory. Zhao Chao was already prepared—he had everyone change into Barbarian military uniforms and follow Li Zhifeng, pretending to be war captives. If they ran into Barbarians, Li Zhifeng could talk to them. This very scenario in fact happened a few times, and they managed to dodge two inspection troops this way without mishaps. Although Li Zhifeng didn't know how to speak Tartar, he knew how to speak Xianbei—which consisted of incredibly harsh and aggressive shouts and grunts. Listening to him made You Miao quake with fear.

They arrived at the southernmost point of the capital region and discovered with dismay that it was completely packed with Barbarian military camps.

“Oh no. We might not be able to get past,” Zhao Chao said worriedly.

As You Miao, Zhao Chao, and Li Zhifeng entered the border of Liu Prefecture, the hills in the distance were still burning. Black smoke rose to the sky and ashes drifted under the sun—the Barbarians were setting the hills on fire! This was something You Miao had never expected. It would seem the Barbarians were still advancing, and the Tianqi army was resisting. Tens of thousands of Xianbei soldiers formed a defense line, blocking the north shore of the Yangtze. Across the river lay Tianqi’s military camp.

Only one more step and they could be back at Riverwave Estate—yet this step was as huge as the natural moat that was the Yangtze River.

“We’ll go through Pei County,” You Miao said decidedly. “I know the area here; follow me!”

It was now You Miao and Li Zhifeng leading the way, and they left Tea Horse Road to head toward Sunshower Tea Estate. When they passed a small eatery on the way, You Miao dismounted and went to knock on the door.

“Is anyone there?”

No one answered. It was now around dusk. You Miao pushed open the door and a foul stench emanated from inside. This small shop was one he’d always stopped at to have tea and eat every time he left or returned to the estate. Li Zhifeng remembered this place as well—he’d once drank of bowl of tea here when he went down the mountain to find a doctor for You Miao.

You Miao entered the inner hall and saw the boss lady’s corpse lying there with her eyes open. Her body was already reeking.

Many of the youths came in as well with their hands over their noses. Toppled chairs and tables were strewn across the floor, and the back kitchen stank of fish and shrimp that had gone bad. You Miao made a round

and noticed the cash had already been looted—obviously, a few waves of Barbarians had swept past here.

Li Zhifeng picked up the boss lady's body and took her outside to bury her.

"Come with me," You Miao said.

He led the group to the storage room; there was nothing left inside, not even a single grain of rice. He bent down and pulled open a wooden board on the floor, revealing a cellar down below.

You Miao beckoned. "Come. Everyone inside."

The cellar was surprisingly spacious, with quite a bit of wine stored.

Raising a lantern to scan the room, Zhao Chao asked, "How'd you know about this place?"

"I used to play here all the time with the boss lady's son when I was little," You Miao replied. "Let's spend a night here first."

You Miao spread out some straw and let the women sleep inside the cellar while Zhao Chao arranged for a few of the men to sleep in the front yard and a few to guard the back.

"I'll go scout," You Miao said.

"It's too late now." Zhao Chao stopped him. "Go tomorrow."

This night, You Miao tossed and turned on the table he lay on in the front hall. Sleep eluded him. Knowing he was worried, Li Zhifeng came over to hold him, and the two woke at the first light of morning. As he mounted his horse, You Miao told Zhao Chao and the others to remain in the abandoned eatery to hide for the time being while he and Li Zhifeng would go ahead to scout the road.

Black smoke fogged their way forward. Mount Qingfeng of Liu Prefecture had already been burned to ash by the flaming forests, and rain

drizzled from the sky. Dozens of years' worth of tea hills, destroyed just like that.

"The old man's estate is completely ruined," You Miao said. "I wonder how my relatives in Liu Prefectural City are doing."

Li Zhifeng rode with You Miao on one horse, and when he heard him, he petted You Miao's head. You Miao couldn't stop thinking about his dad. The man was riddled with faults and was a terrible person, but they were nonetheless father and son; connected by blood. Moreover, this tea hill had been personally planted by You Miao's mother, Qiao Ke-er. It'd been planted the year he was born—and after dozens of years of growth, it all went up in smoke with a simple fire.

Dead trees could be replaced and replanted, but dead people could never come back. You Miao recalled there *was* a time his dad fawned over him when he was little, when he was still ignorant of everything. His dad would drink tea in the study and mumble, " *You ask of my return, but alas, there is no date. Night rain at Mount Ba inundates the autumn pools …* [7]." You Miao would cuddle and whine in You Dechuan's arms, and You Dechuan would hold him, petting his head.

You Miao couldn't help but feel sadness well up in his heart when this memory came to him. Since his last return to Liu Prefecture, there wasn't been a day that he didn't throw a fit at the old man. The last time they had talked was during the Lantern Festival three years ago when he went home for dinner—he had argued with the old man then, cursing at him to die faster. Yet even when it was time for him to leave for the capital to attend the exams, the old man still had Qiao Jue pass him money and praised him for his growth.

Li Zhifeng tightened his hug. When You Miao only shook his head in response, he said, consoling him, "Don't cry. Everyone must leave their father one day. It's perfectly natural for eagle fledglings to leave their nests."

Realizing that Li Zhifeng had never mentioned his own father, You Miao asked as he wiped away his tears, "How does your dad treat you?"

Li Zhifeng thought for a moment, then replied, “He never spoke to me. He rarely talked to my brother, either.”

You Miao was astonished. “Never?”

“Once. When I was very young, I went to show him a bird I shot down,” Li Zhifeng said. “He said, ‘Good.’ That was the first and last thing he ever said to me. And then one night, he died of illness. My brother wouldn’t let me go see him.”

So the Quanrong King was like that… You Miao was a little surprised. “What about your mom?”

“My mom is a Han,” Li Zhifeng replied.

You Miao was momentarily stunned silent. “...Your mom is a Han?” he exclaimed. “Would you be able to find her?”

Li Zhifeng shook his head. “My mom was captured by the Quanrong. She died a few days after returning to her village. She is buried at the edge of Yueya Springs.”

“What about your brother?” You Miao continued to ask.

“His mother came from a small northlands tribe,” Li Zhifeng replied. “That’s all I know.”

You Miao sighed. “You must not feel anything strong toward your dad, then…”

“I understand the filial piety and fraternity of you Hans,” Li Zhifeng said. “You’ve explained it to me before, back when you were studying. But the Quanrong don’t need to support their fathers. Besides, your father has his own thoughts on the matter, so there’s no need to be overly sad.”

Humanity, Justice, Propriety, Wisdom, and Filial Piety—these were the five cardinal principles the great Confucian scholars had instilled in Han society. You Miao knew only the Han held these values; the tribes beyond the border rarely broached these subjects. Some were so savage that mutual

violence between fathers and sons was commonplace, but there were also others that relied on blood relations to maintain their families.

It was sometimes really difficult for him to understand—the nomadic tribes led a life without Confucius and Mencius teachings, without books and learning. Was that not simply an endless night of pure primal desires? To set fire to all that was beautiful, the carvings and paintings; plundering the gold and money and other such things. For the Han, the ancient sages had inked their wisdom down in books to pass down their knowledge, leading to the gradual shaping of Han principles. Yet once a civilization had books and was well-educated, should it not be increasingly powerful and prosperous? How had it come to ruin at the hands of such *barbarians* ?

“We’re here,” Li Zhifeng said.

Sunshower Tea Estate was right before their eyes. You Miao snapped out of it. When he looked up, he noticed that the establishment plaque was on the ground, trampled in half. It made him stop, suddenly scared of stepping foot inside.

“I’ll go in?” Li Zhifeng suggested.

“Let’s go in together,” You Miao said at last.

His voice was quivering, and Li Zhifeng held him to help him calm down before he drove the horse through the front entrance of the manor. They were greeted by the chaos of war—the entire estate was destroyed. A great plundering seemed to have taken place. This broken manor was encaged within the ashen hills, and shrouded by the damp and humid mist.

The windows of the great hall were shattered. Books littered the grounds, ripped to shreds. However, there were thankfully no corpses. You Miao dismounted the horse and walked toward the garden, but when he crossed the corridors, he jumped in surprise.

The butler was dead with his eyes still wide open. He was hugging a pillar, nailed to it by stray arrows. You Miao stayed away from him and continued to the inner yard—and promptly saw several servants who had

been trampled to death; their guts spilled across the grounds. Li Zhifeng trailed quietly behind him. You Miao's lips began to tremble, until finally, he cried out.

" *Dad* —!"

There was a sob in his voice, but no one answered him in this vast, empty estate. He ran past the corridor and pushed into his father's room, and it was completely empty inside. He went to every single room and pushed every single door open; everything that was valuable had been looted. But there were no dead bodies.

He gradually calmed down, and searched through the entire estate —even the small trains at the back of the mountain. When he finally confirmed that his father, You Hange, and the others weren't here, he breathed a sigh of relief at last.

It was past noon now, and You Miao sat down to mull things over. Now that he had cooled off, it was clear that most of the people here had fled beforehand. Of course, it was also possible that they had been captured, but why would the Barbarians do that? If even the butler was killed, the servants wouldn't stand a chance.

The only plausible explanation was that You Dechuan had ran away, leaving the butler and several servants behind to watch the property —who were then slaughtered by the invading Tartars.

You Miao rose to his feet and went back to his father's room. He said to Li Zhifeng, "Give me a hand and move that closet to the side."

Li Zhifeng gave it a test push before picking it up and throwing it to the side, where it crashed with a loud sound.

You Miao reached in to where the closet once stood and groped around an empty lattice. He felt every corner of it, but there was nothing contained within. With that, he relaxed.

"What is it?"

“Land deeds, loan receipts, money bills.” You Miao leaned against Li Zhifeng like he was sapped of all of his strength. “The old man fled ahead of time.”

Li Zhifeng nodded. After You Miao ensured there were no Barbarians around watching the back mountain roads, they returned to report to Zhao Chao, and had the group set out. They crossed the estate and headed for Anlu Village via the small back mountain paths. En route, You Miao didn’t dare to light torches, and the group very quietly hurried on their way in the dark of the night until they encountered a large troop ahead of them. Zhao Chao hastily instructed everyone to hide in the wild fields on either side of the road.

Yet to their surprise, the soldiers heading their way spoke the Han tongue.

“Go faster!”

“Watch out up front!”

“Report! Lord Wang, there are hoof marks! By the looks of them, they should be Han horses!”

When they heard this, You Miao could feel his body freeze—he was dumbfounded, spurred by excitement.

Zhao Chao quickly stood up and shouted, “The troop ahead! We’re on the same side! We’re all on the same side!”

The passing soldiers stopped and brandished their crossbows.

“A Jie scout? Put down your weapons!” someone said coldly.

That voice had Ping Xi stand up immediately. “Wang Yong? Is that you, Wang Yong?!” He ran onto the road and shouted, “It’s me, Ping Xi!”

“Vice Minister Ping?!” The general was in disbelief, and he blurted, “How are you all here?”

“What are you guys up to?” Zhao Chao joined the group on the road and hopped to the center.

Everyone else came out of hiding, but just as You Miao was about to do the same, Li Zhifeng pressed him back down by the shoulder, giving a small shake of his head. You Miao nodded, understanding what he meant.

Zhao Chao’s appearance was no small fright for Wang Yong, and he quickly dismounted his horse, bending one knee to the ground and cupping his hands toward Zhao Chao in salute.

“Your Highness! General Nie is currently fighting the enemies on the front lines. He’s preparing to ambush the Jie’s military camp tonight!”

Nie Dan hadn’t died!

You Miao’s sight went black. Thank goodness, Nie Dan wasn’t dead.

Zhao Chao mounted a horse at once. “Take me to go see General Nie Dan right now!”

Only then did Li Zhifeng stand up from the bushes. The youths were all crying tears of joy; after months of desperation and wandering, they finally saw their own people again.

Wang Yong explained the current situation as they went: the Five Barbarian Tribes had advanced all the way to the Yangtze and were currently fighting the Han for the large area of land that was north of Liu Prefecture. They had engaged in close combat nearly ten times. The imperial court had retreated to Yang Prefecture, where the great army had built a line of defense. Meanwhile, Nie Dan was roaming Liu Prefecture with an army of two thousand, ready to break through the enemy’s defense at any given opportunity in order to go northward to seek the monarchs lost there.

The government now sat in Yang Prefecture, and the officials who had fled south were without a leader. Everyone was in a state of anxiety. The Barbarians demanded surrender from all six prefectures of Jiangnan,

and knowing he was powerless against the enemy, the Magistrate of Pei County led the county militia and its people to surrender. Fortunately, Yang Prefecture had Sun Yu holding down the fort—powerfully crushing the public's objection, he allowed Nie Dan to fight.

The excitement You Miao felt could not be described. Wang Yong brought the group to the frontlines, where all was chaos: both sides were currently engaged in combat, and at the break of dawn, they could no longer tell who belonged to which side. The cries of killing shook the heavens.

Wang Yong roared, "My brothers! Protect His Highness the Third Prince and Her Highness the Second Princess! Follow me to charge!"

The soldiers all cheered in unison as they rampaged past the enemy line.

"His Highness is back—!"

" *His Highness has returned to court* —!"

" *His Highness has returned to court* —!"

The one shout was answered by hundreds more in the dark night. As dawn broke across the horizon and the sun's rays spilled across the land, the cries had the rest of the Tianqi army pause.

But then, Zhao Chao yelled to them: "My brothers! FOLLOW ME AND *KILL* !"

A troop of two hundred charged and breached the enemy formation. The Jie soldiers didn't know what just happened and, thinking Han reinforcements had arrived, they all scattered. As they drew back and made their retreat, they trampled over one another, breaking up their own army in the process. Just like that, Wang Yong led his men and rushed to the frontlines where the two armies were crossing swords. The rear formation of their own side was alarmed by the charge, thinking that their own line had been breached, so they began to outflank the small charging troop.

You Miao yelled, “Don’t shoot! We’re on the same side—! Same side! *Our own people* !”

It was utter mayhem at the scene. More and more soldiers rushed to surround the main military camp in order to defend it. And then, a commanding general emerged from the crowd.

“Your Highness!”

It was Nie Dan’s voice.

You Miao exhaled a deep, exhausted sigh—they were home.

The entire camp was shaken. Wherever Zhao Chao passed, the soldiers bowed. Nie Dan brought the group inside the main camp, and at this point, You Miao was so ready to pass out that he couldn’t utter a word. Nonetheless, he hung on to discuss military affairs with the rest.

“Is there food?” Zhao Chao asked. “Let them rest first.”

“No time to rest,” Nie Dan said. “The Jie will make their charge very soon. Victory or defeat will be decided in this battle.”

“I’m not familiar with Jiangbei’s terrain,” Zhao Chao said. “Is it possible to…”

You Miao’s eyelids kept drooping. The more he listened, the more he felt himself slipping. He leaned against Li Zhifeng to rest in the corner of the tent.

“Eat something,” Li Zhifeng coaxed.

You Miao pushed Li Zhifeng’s hand away and fell asleep. He didn’t know how long he was out for, but when he opened his eyes again, Li Zhifeng was still by his side. There were voices ringing from a distance.

“Cross the river!” Zhao Chao flipped open the tent flap and entered. “We’re leaving right now. We’ll send you back to Jiangnan first.”

“Are we about to lose again?” You Miao asked, smacking his lips. He was numb by now.

“Don’t be such a downer. With Nie-da-ge around, we won’t lose,” Zhao Chao replied.

“Why isn’t he dead yet?” You Miao continued to ask.

Zhao Chao gave up. Li Zhifeng patted You Miao on the back, letting him sit up.

“Can’t you say something nice?” Zhao Chao questioned in exasperation.

You Miao still remembered that day at the imperial court when everyone had thought Nie Dan was dead. The news of his death had directly caused the capital’s defeat after the collapse of military morale. The emperor, uncaring for all, had then left the city to escape southward, and that gave the Tartars the chance to breach the city.

“Back then, Nie-da-ge was knocked unconscious and was captured by a Barbarian huntsman,” Zhao Chao explained. “The huntsman took his belongings, which were later bought by the Tartars—and that led to everything else. Come, quick. Rise and shine. I’m sending you home first! Nie-da-ge and I need to go to Yang Prefectural Office to round up people.”

When You Miao heard that he was going back to his estate, he immediately jolted and scrambled up to get dressed.

After the previous chaotic battle ended with a tie on both sides, there was a temporary ceasefire at the north shore. Soldiers were gradually withdrawing from the frontlines. Amidst all the commotion, Zhao Chao sent You Miao into a carriage. Utterly confused with what was going on, You Miao retreated southward with Li Zhifeng, traveling all the way to the riverbank where a ferry awaited them.

Nie Dan joined them by horse, and leapt onto the ship as well. The ferry headed for Jiangnan, crossing the vast river.

“I see there’s a cliff on the east side,” Nie Dan said. “I wonder if we’ll be able to make use of it.”

You Miao instantly recalled the suspension bridges that hung across the river at Riverwave Estate. He immediately answered, “I’ve got an idea! Li Zhifeng, are the suspension bridges still intact?”

With this question, Li Zhifeng basically grasped what You Miao was thinking. But he shook his head. “I’m not sure. They were still there when I left home.”

“Come with me!” You Miao exclaimed. “Don’t go to the Yang Prefectural Office anymore!”

The ferry moored five miles upstream from Anlu Village’s pier. After arriving at the Jiangnan shore, they still needed to hurry to higher ground on horseback. The fields along each side of the official road were lushly green, but people were scarcely seen — they had probably all run to Yang Prefecture to hide when they learned that war had broken out. It took a quarter of an hour of running before they finally saw someone.

The man straightened from the field at the sight of the approaching party and greeted them. “Ah! The young master of Riverwave Estate is back!”

You Miao turned his head to him and smiled. “Yeah!”

The horses dashed past, instantly leaving that man far behind. They were coming closer and closer to the estate now.

“ *Hiyah* !” You Miao shouted, spurring his horse to run as fast as possible. His speed left everyone behind. The excitement in his heart was hard to suppress as he charged into the estate.

Many tenant farmers were still working here, sowing the fields. When they saw a steed run inside, followed closely by another, and then another dozen bearing soldiers, they all looked up curiously.

“I’m back!” You Miao yelled.

“Shaoye!”

“It’s shaoye!”

Word spread quickly among the tenants. A large number of them were stunned by the news.

Li Zhifeng was right on his tail and cautioned, “Slow down. Don’t fall.”

You Miao pulled the reins, kicked the stirrups away, and hopped off the horse. He scrambled like a stray dog as he ran toward the manor. The establishment plaque of Shen Garden was as it had always been, and a boy servant was washing the entrance door. You Miao rushed up and gave him a kick, then laughed heartily as he crossed the threshold.

“Shaoye—!” In a flash, the boy servant exclaimed, and then hollered, “Shaoye is back!”

“Shaoye!”

The boy servants were all alerted, and they rushed out from every corner of the manor to hug You Miao, some crying and some laughing. Cheng Guangwu was bawling as he went over. Standing in the front yard, You Miao exhaled a long, long breath. Upon the spirit screen, there hung a Buddhist rosary.

After tethering the horses, Li Zhifeng stepped through the entrance.

“Butler Feng is back too!” someone exclaimed.

“I’m back,” Li Zhifeng replied impassively. “Call everyone out. Where’s Lord Uncle?”

“Lord Uncle went to Yang Prefecture!” Yaoguang said, smiling. “This is great. Shaoye is home!”

Silence befell the manor. Many people were missing, and only then did You Miao notice something amiss.

“How come there’s only a few of you left?”

Cheng Guangwu gesticulated as he explained, filling You Miao and Li Zhifeng in. As it turned out, when war broke out in Jiangbei, the villagers of Anlu began to withdraw southward. Seeing that the situation was worsening, Qiao Jue had no choice but to temporarily seek asylum in Yang Prefecture, bringing all the valuables with him. The boy servants who attended You Miao didn’t want to leave, however, so they all stayed behind. Qiao Jue couldn’t convince them to go, so the most he could do was instruct Cheng Guangwu to have everyone make a swift escape south should things turn for the worse.

“ *Heartbreaking be the evergreen waters under the bridge, wherein I once saw her beautiful figure reflected.* ” Zhao Chao’s voice sounded from outside the entrance. “Good poem.”

Zhao Chao and Nie Dan had only just arrived. You Miao beckoned them.

“Nie-da-ge, Your Highness, come inside.” He then turned to the servants and said, “Off to your duties! Make food, make food! Is Mrs. Qian still around? Did she run away too?”

“No, she’s here,” Cheng Guangwu quickly answered. “Changyuan is keeping a lookout over at the bridge. Mrs. Qian didn’t leave, and many other people also stuck around. They come to clean the manor every day.”

You Miao led Nie Dan and Zhao Chao inside, and the boy servants immediately went to dust the divans and boil water. However, Nie Dan looked displeased.

“Skip the tea,” he said. “Why did you bring us here? Military affairs are urgent. If there’s nothing important, I will take my leave.”

“No rush, there *are* important matters,” You Miao replied. “Nie-da-ge, just take a seat.”

Zhao Chao ordered, “Go sit.”

You Miao brewed a bowl of tea for each of them, and Li Zhifeng entered with the large map of the estate.

"Table," Li Zhifeng said. The boy servants moved a table into the main hall, and Li Zhifeng turned to You Miao. "The suspension bridges are still there."

With a crinkling sound, Li Zhifeng rolled the map open with an easy, swift hand. He pulled back one edge and spread the vellum across the entire table.

After staring at the map for a moment, humming, You Miao said, "This is the map of Riverwave Estate. It touches Guozhuang Village in the north and stretches all the way to Anlu Village in the south. Let's not worry about the south for the moment. In the north, there are two iron-cabled suspension bridges. One was built four years ago when I first arrived at the estate, and the other was built last year. They are both functional."

Nie Dan seemed to understand now. "A night raid?"

"There's a chance," Zhao Chao mumbled.

You Miao took a brush and drew a circle around Guozhuang Village downstream. "There's also a pier here. The river becomes narrow in this area and the winds and currents are stronger, more rapid. Boats can't move here."

"Hm." Nie Dan nodded, his eyes narrowed.

You Miao added, "We can withdraw everyone to Jiangnan, all two thousand men. Once we've retreated, the Jie will definitely think we've fled and build camp on the south shore. The cavalry can then cross the river via Riverwave Estate to head northward to ambush them from behind. Charge from the high ground—their escape routes will be blocked and they'll be forced to the river. They're all cavalry; the upstream terrain is nothing but quagmires. Horse hooves will sink into the swamps easily, so they will have no choice but to go downstream."

“Got it,” Nie Dan immediately said. Then after throwing back his tea, he said, “Take me to look at the suspension bridges.”

“I’m not done!” You Miao said.

“No need to say more,” Nie Dan said. “Give the command—tell the men to cross the river in secret.”

However, Li Zhifeng spoke up. “Here.”

He pointed at a spot on the map—the cliffs by the river.

“If I remember correctly, there are still boulders weighing millions of tons piled up there. We can wait until the Jie come, then push those boulders down the cliff all at once.

You Miao was surprised. “Where’d the rocks come from?”

“They were carried down by the Yangtze during the flash flood last summer,” Li Zhifeng replied. “Lord Uncle got people to haul the rocks up to the cliffs by way of wooden carts. He planned to use them to build an embankment.”

A boy servant poked his head in from outside the door, and You Miao called out to him, “What is it?”

“Shaoye.”

It was Changyuan, with his hands tucked in his sleeves. Of all of You Miao’s direct boy servants, Changyuan was the second oldest after Cheng Guangwu.

“Come here.” You Miao waved him over with a smile.

Changyuan entered the main hall, and he and You Miao shared a quick hug. Changyuan breathed a sigh.

“Good health to Shaoye. Everyone’s been worried sick for the past few months.”

You Miao chuckled. “Well, aren’t I back now?”

Changyuan bowed. “When Mrs. Qian heard shaoye was back, she went to make some food. Cheng Guangwu told her to whip up something quick and simple first, so there are some noodles on the stove. Does shaoye want to eat now, or wait for a bit?”

“Eat first, eat first.” You Miao’s sight almost went black again, and he said, “Bring four bowls over.”

A boy servant was already waiting outside the door holding a platter, and he brought it in as soon as he heard You Miao’s command. Four extra-large and neatly-plated bowls were served; each had crispy-skinned pork with tender meat, two sunny-side up eggs, and fresh green bok choy laid on top of the soup.

You Miao almost went berserk at the delicious aroma of the food. He passed the first bowl to Zhao Chao. When Li Zhifeng picked up his own bowl and made to go eat outside, however, You Miao said, “Li Zhifeng always eats with me. It’s usually like this, and it’s the same rule even when there are guests.”

When Zhao Chao saw the noodles, he stopped caring for anything else, so he waved dismissively to gesture that it wasn’t a problem and sat down to start gorging himself. Nie Dan, however, only took two bites before he set the bowl down. His eyes were still fixed on the map, his brows deeply knitted.

You Miao and Zhao Chao inhaled their noodles like two hungry ghosts. Afterward, You Miao said, “Li Zhifeng, bring some top-grade tea over.”

Li Zhifeng acknowledged the instruction and brewed four cups of oolong.

Nie Dan spent a brief moment discussing the battle strategy, and once the details were solidified, he finished his noodles like a whirlwind. “I will go arrange the retreat.”

“I’ll take some men to stand guard at the estate’s suspension bridges and set up some traps while I’m at it,” Zhao Chao said.

“Let me go,” Li Zhifeng said.

“It wasn’t easy to get back here. Why don’t the two of you just relax?” Zhao Chao replied.

However, Li Zhifeng said, “This is my home. The Jie have infringed all the way to my front door; I *have* to go to battle.”

You Miao gazed at Li Zhifeng, his heart full and warm in this moment. “I’ll go too.”

But Li Zhifeng instructed instead, “Changyuan, assist the young master with his bath. Weizhen will come with me to be my messenger. Shaowei, go to Yang Prefecture to deliver word to Lord Uncle. Guangwu, go out there and call back all the tenant farmers who have left the estate. Tell them that the young master is back and to prepare for sowing for the coming spring. If they don’t return to the estate, the land will be leased to other people.”

The boy servants all answered with a “yessir!” and scattered to run their assigned errands. You Miao couldn’t help but grin. But just as he was about to comment, Li Zhifeng turned to him.

“I will send word back with Weizhen later, so relax and go rest.”

And he was gone before You Miao could respond.

Zhao Chao thought for a moment. “I’m off too, then.”

You Miao nodded, and suddenly, everyone was gone. He sat there in the main hall, reveling in the scenery. It was great to be home. He was so happy that he could’ve run twice around the estate until he collapsed on his own land, crying out in elation.

As he drank his tea, Changyuan entered holding his clothes. “Which set does shaoye want to wear?”

“Doesn’t matter.” You Miao was in absolute tatters. He was still wearing the Xianbei armor, and it was thoroughly worn out at this point. “Fucking hell, my sad little life almost *expired* in Da’an.”

That night, the rain had stopped, though gloomy clouds still canopied the sky—it was the perfect time to slack off. You Miao took a nice, hot bath, then went to bed and passed out completely. Later in the night when he roused, Weizhen was standing outside by the window awaiting orders. As soon as he sensed movement inside the room, he entered to wait on You Miao.

"Butler Feng is already standing watch by the suspension bridge. He asks shaoye not to worry."

"What about His Highness the Third Prince?" You Miao came out, putting on his robes.

Weizhen gaped. "His…His Highness?!"

"The one who looks sour, like people owe him money. He was walking right next to Li Zhifeng… A scar on his eyebrow…" You Miao described.

"He crossed the river to Jiangbei," Weizhen replied.

You Miao nodded. Changyuan came over to set down more food—bamboo shoots stir-fried with cured meat, braised fish, toon meatball soup, and a bowl of steamed egg. You Miao was in awe of how thoughtful the meal was; nothing but heavy dishes, for fear he wouldn't fill his stomach to the fullest. He shoveled three large bowls of rice down his throat in a fit of over-indulgence.

As he ate, something occurred to him and he asked, "Did Li Zhifeng make the steamed egg?"

"Yes," Changyuan replied. "After the butler came back in and ha d dinner, he made this dish for shaoye. He left again after putting it on the stove to keep warm."

You Miao was very pleased. After his meal, he downed another super strong cup of oolong tea and leaned back against the soft divan. Jiangnan's spring was still very wet and cold, but the merry fire in the brazier kept the room nice and warm. Since the moment You Miao had

stepped into Shen Garden, his head has basically been empty; churning these words over and over again: it's good to be home, it's good to be home, it's good to be home…

As for the boy servants, the initial joy of seeing You Miao home was over. Hours later, they returned to their own chores as if You Miao had only left home the day before — as if he had merely left for a trip somewhere with Li Zhifeng in Liu or Yang Prefecture.

"Heat the water. Bath time," You Miao ordered lazily.

"Yes, sir," Changyuan answered him from outside the room, then got the servant outside the second entrance to boil water.

At first watch time, You Miao was soaking in the tub while two boy servants washed his hair.

"How did shaoye's hair end up like this?" Mu Yan asked. "Did you not wash it for two months?"

Mu Feng commented as he scrubbed You Miao's back, "Shaoye, you've had it rough."

You Miao sighed. "What I experienced in the north would scare you to death if I told you."

He had taken a beating a month ago, but most of the injuries were internal; the wounds had all healed, leaving only scars. His hair was tangled into one giant mass, and it took Mu Yan two whole hours to thoroughly brush and wash it.

"It's good to be back," Mu Feng said.

"Mn."

You Miao gave a soft nod as he thought of his next actions. He would have to get Zhao Chao to remove Li Zhifeng's slave status. As for whether Li Zhifeng wanted to be a butler or a second master of the house, it really didn't matter; whatever he liked. Qiao Jue would probably move back

tomorrow once he learned that the estate was fine. As for that old dad of his, You Miao would have to ask around to see where he'd run off to.

Eyes closed, You Miao rested an arm on the edge of the tub to let a boy servant scrub it. "Are there any news of the other estate?"

"The other estate's tea trees are all burned. Lord Master fled to Yang Prefecture, so Lord Uncle lent him a house. He took temporary lodging in Yang Prefectural City," Changyuan answered from the outside.

"Huh?" You Miao opened his eyes. "Really?"

Changyuan continued, "I just went to Yang Prefecture the other day, it's true. If shaoye doesn't like this arrangement, maybe have Butler Feng go there with a few men to kick them out?"

You Miao and his old dad were like enemies; he had never held himself back from cursing his dad in front of Changyuan and the others before in the past, so the boy servants all knew what was up.

"No, no, let him stay. I guess," You Miao replied. "Is my brother there too?"

"Yes, everyone's there," Mu Feng answered.

Changyuan added, "The elder young master swung by the estate after learning what happened in the capital; he was very worried. He was going to go to the capital to search for shaoye, but thankfully Lord Uncle held him back."

You Miao snorted. "What good would he have done? He'd probably have just gotten captured by the Barbarians the moment he set off."

Be that as it may, You Miao was still quite touched inside.

Mu Yan smiled. "Thank goodness our shaoye is so capable. Butler Feng, too."

You Miao rose from the water to dry off—he was clean, at long last. The boy servants lit incense before they went to sit together in the front corridors, chatting in whispers. You Miao returned to dozing in the main hall, and Changyuan sat next to him, responding to his on-and-off chatter.

"Shaoye is now both a Censor and a Tanhua," Changyuan said. "Idle time will probably be scarce once the official job starts in the future."

You Miao yawned. "Fuck the Tanhua title. Had I known there'd be so much trouble in the capital, I wouldn't have gone even if you'd beaten me dead."

You Miao watched disinterestedly as Changyuan peeled a tangerine and thought back to this time last year. If time could turn back, would he still have gone? Probably. After having flirted with the knife's edge, he'd practically grown impenetrable skin. If he hadn't gone to the capital and only waited to hear news from within the estate, first of the Tartars destroying the capital, and then the Barbarian invasion reaching the shores of the Yangtze… How miserable would that have been?

" *The country is broken, yet the mountains and rivers remain ; the city is full spring, yet the weeds are tall …* [8]" You Miao recited as he ate a bit of tangerine. However he thought about it, he had to admit that Sun Yu was right. Some things, even when failed, would leave him with a clear conscience for having attempted them. If he had really spent his entire life in the estate screwing around every day, he'd be nothing more than useless trash.

And it was only after returning from that awful experience that he cherished peace so much more.

It wasn't long before there were voices again outside. You Miao thought it was Li Zhifeng who had returned and asked, "What's going on?"

"The kitchen is asking what shaoye wants for a night snack," replied a boy servant.

Thus, You Miao ordered them to make something light. He thought to himself that he'd never be able to face the people and the country if he

continued to eat up a storm — yet after the escape from the north, he'd be wronging himself if he didn't. And so he chanted, "Forgive me, for I have sinned," while he ordered more food.

In the end, the kitchen produced a bowl of sliced fish congee, accompanied by a four-flavored dish with salted duck egg yolk so rich that the grease oozed when poked. When he was done, You Miao still didn't feel like he'd eaten to his heart's content, so he got the kitchen to make him a bowl of shrimp and pork wontons.

After the fact, he had truly eaten so much that the food piled in his stomach was pushing against his throat. Without a choice, he had to lean on Changyuan, and it took a long time before his stomach settled enough that the urge to puke subsided.

[Chapter 37]

Halfway through the night, terrible screams rose from the distance, alarming the boy servants.

Weizhen entered the room and reported, “Shaoye! We’ve won! There’s so many dead down by the river; all the Barbarian dogs are dead!”

Now awake, You Miao said, “Come. Let’s go take a look.”

“Butler Feng sent me to pass on the message that shaoye doesn’t need to go,” Weizhen quickly said. “He’ll be back very soon.”

You Miao sat back down and leaned against the seat, feeling slightly bored and spacing out — however, Weizhen had only just left when Li Zhifeng came back. He was drenched in sweat from head to toe; he hadn’t changed out of his previous clothes yet.

After ordering for water to be heated, You Miao asked Li Zhifeng, “We won?”

“We won,” Li Zhifeng replied affirmatively. “Three thousand enemies annihilated. Nie Dan and his men are cleaning up the battlefield right now.”

“What about Zhao Chao?”

“Went back to Yang Prefecture,” Li Zhifeng replied.

“Home is safe now?”

“Mn.”

“Then go take a bath,” You Miao said. “And come to bed after you’ve washed.”

“Understood.”

This simple round of back and forth made You Miao think that Li Zhifeng might’ve never deemed the Jie soldiers a threat in the first place. The way he responded was as casual as if he’d just shooed away some stray

dogs. But then again, maybe You Miao also wasn't taking the issue as anything important — he'd asked Li Zhifeng if they had won like he was asking if he'd eaten a meat bun.

Li Zhifeng left to take his bath and returned before long, all washed up. You Miao shuffled to make room for him on the bed, so Li Zhifeng came to sit on the edge. His body was suffused with an attractive male scent. Li Zhifeng hunched over, eyeing the tea set on the tray table, and You Miao picked up the cup to feed him some.

Having had his tea, Li Zhifeng instructed the boy servants, "Go make some refreshments for shaoye. Keep it light; nothing harsh on the stomach."

The color quickly drained from You Miao's face, and he said hastily, "I ate, I can't eat anymore. Have some for yourself."

Thus, Li Zhifeng pulled You Miao into his arms. The two cuddled and affectionately nuzzled each other, going to bed shortly after partaking in the snacks. That night was the most comfortable sleep You Miao had ever had; they didn't make love, or talk —they just held each other in silence. Around midnight, they heard Qiao Jue talking to the boy servants outside.

"The young master is sleeping," Yaoguang told him.

Knowing that Qiao Jue was back and the estate had returned to its former state, You Miao comfortably flipped over and curled into Li Zhifeng's arms, falling blissfully asleep.

When the sunlight spilled into the rom the next day, You Miao woke to Li Zhifeng's gentle stroking that made his blood rush upward. Still half-asleep, he reached for Li Zhifeng and kissed him. Clearly, Li Zhifeng had been awake for a while and had wanted to touch him, but had held himself back for fear of waking him. Now that he saw You Miao was awake, he pounced him like a wolf, pulled at his robes like a beast, and sniffed and nuzzled the nape of his neck.

" *Nng* … Not so fast!"

You Miao was gasping and tense, and he almost came the moment Li Zhifeng drove into him. After holding back for half a month, to have Li Zhifeng ram inside so suddenly felt as if all of his cum was being pushed out by the pressure. Pleasure built up below his abdomen. He could feel that Li Zhifeng wasn't thrusting this time —instead, he was gently rocking, nudging and grinding against his prostate. You Miao usually wouldn't find this tactic stimulating enough, but after a whole half month of not making love, this bit of teasing from Li Zhifeng fully ignited You Miao's desire in an instant. He could feel his pre-cum being pushed out slowly by Li Zhifeng, bit by bit, trickling down his length. The sensation was almost like he had lost control of his bladder, and You Miao shuddered, squeezing his legs tightly together almost uncontrollably. But just as he moved, Li Zhifeng pushed in even deeper, driving straight into him—yet still refusing him that sweet release.

"Aah… Aah…" Even his moans were shaky.

Li Zhifeng whispered into his ear, "Loosen up."

You Miao panted heavily; his eyes glazed. Li Zhifeng pulled his cock out a little bit before driving deep into him once more, crushing against that spot yet again. One of his hands reached out to twiddle his nipple, and You Miao's body snapped as if he'd been electrified, pleasure exploding from his ass and coursing through the rest of his body. While distracted, he unconsciously relaxed his hips, and Li Zhifeng used this pause to press against him and use that giant cock of his to grind against You Miao's prostate.

You Miao couldn't hold back any longer. His arousal began to spill in tandem with Li Zhifeng's gentle rocking. He couldn't even tell whether it was urine or cum, because in that moment, his mind was completely blank, his head lolling back as he groaned in pleasure. Li Zhifeng's light thrusting and unhurried grinding instantly pushed You Miao over the edge.

" *Aah* —!" You Miao cried out, his voice shuddering. "Too good… Don't…don't stop…"

"Mmn."

Li Zhifeng captured You Miao's lips, his hips still rocking against him in a languid rhythm, but You Miao's urine was spurting in waves from the thrusts. Although it had only been a short period of time, it felt insurmountably good. His cum soon spilled as well with Li Zhifeng's unceasing motions, and before long, he was sent into yet another round of orgasm. You Miao cried out unconsciously from the pleasure; again and again, Li Zhifeng repeatedly fucked his cum out as it flowed.

You Miao was practically going to pass out from how long the orgasm was being drawn out. His body twitched uncontrollably as it continued to come, on and on until he was coming dry.

"Mmm…"

As the undulating pleasure assaulted his brain, You Miao arched his body from the intensity. He let out a loud scream, his hole clenching down, but Li Zhifeng held him. As he panted harshly, Li Zhifeng finally started to thrust in earnest until You Miao felt a stream of hot wetness fill his insides.

The whole session only took a short ten minutes, but both were left completely drained. You Miao panted brokenly as he leaned into the nook of Li Zhifeng's shoulder, still unable to snap himself out of the overwhelming pleasure from moments before. They'd never done it like this, and it had felt way too good.

"How'd you do that?" You Miao asked. "It was… *so* good."

Li Zhifeng dropped kisses on his ear and gave a "mn," a smile evident in his eyes. The two lay naked on the bed, and You Miao simply spread his limbs out as he stared at the canopy above in a daze.

Li Zhifeng's ears twitched, and he called out to boys outside, "Are there guests?"

Mu Feng answered, "Yes. There are many people waiting for the young master to rise."

It was then that You Miao remembered Qiao Jue was back, and he bolted upright in an instant. "Let's go see."

Li Zhifeng put on his outer robe and opened the door. Instantly, brilliant sunshine spilled into the room. The boy servants filed in, ready to wait on their master. You Miao was still hugging the blanket, completely naked, and he giggled and laughed as he playfully pushed Shaowei around. Li Zhifeng went outside first to wash up, and moments later, he left to order for breakfast to be served.

After a small, disorderly interlude, You Miao emerged. But just as he was about to reach the end of the long corridor, Qiao Jue rushed out, beaming. The uncle and nephew tackled each other in a fierce hug.

"Xiao-jiu! I've missed you *so* much!" You Miao cried.

Qiao Jue immediately made a hushing signal. You Miao understood it meant he had something to say, so he quickly pulled him in the direction of the dining hall. The spring day's sun was radiant and enchanting, so the servants had set up breakfast in the yard.

Qiao Jue spoke as soon as he sat down. "You're finally back. I've been at a loss on what to do. Tell me first how things are on your end — the entire government of Yang Prefecture was talking about you last night, saying you broke into Da'an all by yourself and brought everyone back right under the Tartars' watch. Is that really true?!"

At this question, You Miao knew that Li Yan, Ping Xi, and the others had gone to the Yang Prefectural Office first after their return to Jiangnan. News had subsequently spread, and talk of it dominated the streets. He thus tried to make the bit about himself sound as inconsequential and nonchalant as possible, skimping on description of the perils and dangers. Even then, Qiao Jue's eyes reddened as he listened to him.

"We can talk more about the details when we're free — there's time ahead of us yet." Scared that Qiao Jue would be hurt by grief, You Miao quickly ended the conversation. "So where's my dad and the others?"

"Your brother's here, he's waiting in the main hall. Zhang Er is here too," Qiao Jue replied. "And the Yang Prefecture Governor, as well as someone sent over by the National Protection Army—one of your bros

whom you rescued, the one who used to be the Vice Minister of War, Ping Xi. He was here before the sun was up today. Nie Dan personally came by to check on the war situation last night. Your relatives from the You family, the uncles and cousins, all swung by twice. Last month I told them not to come calling anymore in case the Barbarians crossed the river, but they came again today when they learned that you're back in the estate. And then there was the Yang Prefecture Department of Military Defense, stewards from three of the big shot ministers of the south, the Governor of Liu Prefecture…they've all come by."

You Miao was startled, and Qiao Jue continued, "Right now, it's only your brother and Zhang Er sitting in the hall. I've sent everyone else home."

"Oh good!" You Miao quickly said. "Tell them I fell ill as soon as I got home."

"That's exactly what I told them," Qiao Jue replied.

Not knowing whether to laugh or cry at the situation, You Miao asked, "What the heck… What did they want, coming my way?"

"Well, His Highness the Third Prince is back," Qiao Jue said. "Why don't you tell *me* what they want, coming here?"

When it still didn't click for You Miao, Qiao Jue chuckled.

"Miao-zi, they all say that you're in for a high government position this time."

"No, no," You Miao quickly denied. "Isn't the imperial court back?"

Qiao Jue watched You Miao for a moment, then slowly shook his head. "That teacher of yours is now in charge of Yang Prefecture's government. The Governor of Su Prefecture is dead. Your teacher, the Governor of Yang Prefecture, and the Governor of Liu Prefecture—those three high officials are currently seated in the government office of Yang Prefecture. Now that the Third Prince is back, that good friend of yours,

Ping Xi, came today to tell you to pack immediately and take Li Zhifeng into town with you."

Li Zhifeng was on the side eating his congee, and when he heard Qiao Jue, he glanced at You Miao.

Qiao Jue continued, "The way I see it, you should probably put off seeing any guests today and go out through the back door. Li Zhifeng, go on and saddle a horse. The two of you should make a trip to Yang Prefectural City…"

"Hold up." You Miao stopped Qiao Jue. "I'm not taking any positions just yet."

Qiao Jue was dumbfounded, and You Miao said with a smile, "In any case, I have my own thoughts on the matter. Xiao-jiu, my teacher hasn't summoned me to the city, so I must not rush this."

Qiao Jue was also an intelligent man, and he smiled when he heard You Miao. "Of course. You know what's proper. Your Xiao-jiu is reassured now."

After finishing the last few bites of his congee, You Miao went to greet the guests. Qiao Jue continued to fill him in.

"Your dad has been staying in our store in Yang Prefecture for the past half month, and he constantly talks about you. Last night, I heard a report from Guangwu that he wants to come to the estate to see you no matter what. I told him there's no rush, though—since ancient times, there's only ever been the son going to the father; there's never been a reason for it to be the other way around. I was initially thinking of having you go pay him a visit; it'd settle him down and avoid talk…"

You Miao absolutely loved Qiao Jue to death. He immediately replied, "Yes, yes, that's the way to do it…"

As the two chatted, they and Li Zhifeng stepped into the main hall. From inside, Zhang Wenhan sprung to his feet and called out loudly, "Shaoye!" and engulfed You Miao in a tight hug. You Miao patted his

shoulder with a smile. You Hange also approached and stood next to him, so You Miao gave him a pat on the shoulder too.

"Da-ge," he greeted, smiling.

You Hange let out a breath of relief. "You're finally back. I can't believe so much happened in just half a year."

You Miao beckoned the two to sit and Qiao Jue took his leave, returning to the back to manage things. As for Li Zhifeng, he went to boil water and brew tea for You Miao.

As soon as Zhang Wenhan sat down, he produced a document. "His Highness sent me to deliver word. Once shaoye has recovered, go to the Yang Prefectural Office as soon as possible. This document is the imperial edict to clear Li-xiong's registry. The Vice Minister of Rites brought it along with him when he moved south last year."

You Miao had already gotten a general idea of the big picture from Qiao Jue, so he only flashed a brief smile when he received the edict and gave Li Zhifeng a pat. Li Zhifeng accepted the edict and casually folded it up, tucking it away.

You Miao poked him teasingly. "So what're you gonna do?"

"Nothing," Li Zhifeng replied. "Continue to be your butler?"

You Miao nodded and turned back to Zhang Wenhan. "How are things at court?"

Zhang Wenhan sighed, shaking his head. "They're all complete goners. Last month, all the officials both high and low over at the Yang Prefectural Office were in heated arguments, but they still couldn't come up with a direction. Fortunately, old Mister Sun is around to forcefully shut everyone down, and was able to transfer General Nie back to defense to hold the Yangtze's north shore. Presently, the civil officials have no posts and the military officers have no seals; no one is willing to listen to anyone. Some want to fight and take back the north, some advocate to defend the south. There are already nearly two hundred thousand refugees who've fled

to Jiangnan, but they're still not yet settled. Shaoye, you haven't seen what it's like inside Yang Prefectural City. Everyone's on edge right now."

You Miao answered with a "mn," and Li Zhifeng spoke up. "Have a cup of tea first. Zhang Er, you're not coming back to stay at the manor?"

Zhang Wenhan was taken aback at first before he replied, "I am currently an assistant under Mister Sun. Shaoye, aren't you going to rush to see him?"

You Miao didn't answer him, but asked instead, "When you were coming over today, did he ask after me?"

Zhang Wenhan furrowed his brows slightly. "No."

Understanding, You Miao said, "I'm not going back just yet. When you go back, help me bring word to His Highness. Just say that the journey's been exhausting and I fell sick."

Despite his puzzlement, Zhang Wenhan nodded. You Miao continued, "Just go back to Yang Prefecture and do what you must. If anything comes up, I'll send Guangwu to deliver you word."

After having his tea, Zhang Wenhan still looked as if he had something to say, but You Miao shot him a look that signaled him not to pry further. He could only leave with a belly full of questions.

You Hange had been drinking tea silently the entire time, and only let out a sigh after Zhang Wenhan had left. "Didi, why aren't you going to see dad?"

You Miao answered with a wry smile, "I do want to, but would you say it's right for me to go right now?"

If things were to progress as he expected, then Li Yan, Ping Xi, and the others would all become pillars of the new imperial court upon their return to Jiangnan. Zhao Chao would also be inaugurated as the emperor, since he was the only one left in the royal family. Half of this new Tianqi imperial court had been rescued and brought back by You Miao; if he was

promised a position, there was nothing else suitable besides Political Advisor. Yet the present political situation was exceedingly sensitive — the Yang Prefecture's government and the local gentry were the regional power, with Jiangnan's three magnates taking direct charge. One of those magnates was even You Miao's teacher.

The gentry who had fled south to Jiangnan, however, also demanded their own proper standing. You Miao was a Tanhua of the imperial capital; he had taken on a position there before the exodus to the south. But he was from Jiangnan, and to add to the headaches, he was also Sun Yu's student. The three identities stacked up to be something extremely awkward. Thus, at a time like this, all he could do was keep his distance until the imperial court sent him a formal invitation.

Naturally, You Hange didn't get it, and he got upset instead. "Didi, what you said isn't right. A man takes up learning in order to serve the country. And now that the nation is in peril, everyone's come to Jiangnan and reported for duty in the Yang Prefecture's government. Yet here you are, pretending to be sick at home? If the country needs me and asks for me, of course I'll be willing. But you, on the other hand…"

You Miao laughed. "If you want to be an official, I *could* recommend you…"

You Hange was having none of it, and said furiously, "This is disloyalty! And refusing to visit Father after his escape to Yang Prefecture is unfilial!"

The accusation raised You Miao's hackles, but he couldn't lower himself to You Hange's level, so he only said in appeasement, "Okay, okay, okay. I get it, I'll go."

You Hange didn't say any more and put down his tea. "Goodbye, didi. Take care."

You Miao didn't quite know whether to laugh or cry at You Hange's abrupt departure—what even the heck? He couldn't communicate with You Hange at all, and reckoned that he probably wouldn't be able to

properly explain the political situation to him anyway, so You Miao had to shelve it for now.

After You Hange had left, one of Qiao Jue's personal attendants from the Tingzhuhai courtyard came to the main hall with a ledger to have You Miao reconcile the books.

In no mood to check accounts at all, You Miao said, "Just leave it to Li Zhifeng."

"What about you? What are you going to do?"

Li Zhifeng didn't see You Hange off, nor had he bothered with Zhang Wenhan's business. He had been sitting there detached this entire time, drinking his tea.

"I'm gonna go stroll in the garden and think about some things," You Miao replied.

As Li Zhifeng reconciled the books inside the main hall, another messenger came to inform them that Qiao Jue had gone out to organize the spring sowing, check on the fields, and release goods to the tenant farmers. You Miao nodded. He sat hugging his knees in the long corridor of the garden and watched the blue sky and the white clouds. This spring day was sunny and fair, the sun hanging high in the sky. He had returned home at last.

The fall of the imperial capital almost felt like a lifetime ago. The throngs of gentry who'd fled south were like immense schools of carp moving downstream; it wouldn't be long before Sun Yu and the others finalized the details of the capital's relocation—and the choice would no doubt be Yang Prefecture. You Miao could practically see the image of Zhao Chao dressed in magnificence as he ascended the throne. However, to strike back against the north and recover the vast land of the Central Plains would be a long, drawn-out war. The more chaotic the times, the more collected the people in charge would have to be—before they could act, they must wait until the true powers of all sides surfaced so that they could clearly assess the situation.

You Miao still remembered Sun Yu's tireless past teachings. The fact that Sun Yu hadn't summoned him to take on a post despite knowing he had returned was a clear sign — the best decision for him right now was to stay in the estate, to bide his time, and wait for Zhao Chao or Sun Yu's word.

You Miao watched the fish in the pond and was suddenly engulfed with loving attachment to Riverwave Estate. After running about in the north for so long, his body was tired, but his heart was even more so. Every blade of grass, every tree, every flower and every fish of the estate was filled with an indescribable gentleness. Like a mother's embrace, returning to the estate could wash away the filth and travel-weariness of a drifting son.

Mu Yan came over, but only stopped and stood beside You Miao with his hands down.

You Miao's brow wrinkled, and he glanced at Mu Yan. "What?"

"Shaoye, your father is here," Mu Feng said.

"..."

[Text Break]

In the end, You Dechuan still personally came to Riverwave Estate after all. It was a little unexpected, actually. Judging by the timing, You Hange probably hadn't even gotten back yet before You Dechuan couldn't sit still anymore and made the trip himself.

"Where's my dad?" You Miao asked, even though he wasn't quite sure how to face the man right now.

Mu Feng replied stoically, "Front hall. Butler Feng is keeping him company, having tea."

With an idea now, You Miao got to his feet. "Accompany me to get changed."

In the front hall, Madam Wang had a face plastered with apologetic smiles as she assisted You Dechuan with sitting down. You Dechuan cleared his throat a few times, raising his eyes to regard Li Zhifeng, seemingly displeased. He couldn't believe a servant was sitting in a higher status seat than him, in his own son's house. He was going to scold Li Zhifeng, but when he met his eyes—eyes that were as sharp as knives—he froze and didn't dare utter a single word.

Li Zhifeng scanned the room before he went to wash the cups and brew a pot of tea, without minding anyone else.

"Uncle You, please."

Li Zhifeng placed a small cup on the table, and Cheng Guangwu approached to take it. However, Madam Wang rose to her feet, beaming.

"Let me, let me…"

You Dechuan gave a grunt when the teacup was served to him. Sitting in the guest seat, he took a sip. "I heard you rescued Miao-zi from Da'an, undaunted by the thousands of miles of distance. Truly, a loyal servant. Your sincerity is commendable, thank you."

Li Zhifeng replied impassively, "It's within my duties. Miao-zi has been with me for five years, and he also saved my life once. You Hans stress that 'the learned would die for bosom friends' — that's what it means."

You Dechuan had intended to say something nice and polite at first, then casually remind Li Zhifeng to watch his own status and not hold his master hostage with his kind deeds. Yet who would've thought that Li Zhifeng would say such a thing, and spoke as if You Miao was his xiao-di. You Dechuan was rendered speechless.

For a while, the hall was silent, and the air stifled with tangible awkwardness.

Meanwhile, You Miao was making his way over to the front hall. As he traversed the long corridor, songbirds and fragrant flowers enveloped

his path as the spring sun splashed the grounds with its oblique rays. He was only halfway there when Cheng Guangwu came with a letter.

"Shaoye. From the Yang Prefectural Office."

You Miao was mildly puzzled. "What's this?"

There was nothing marked on the letter, or any signature from the sender. He took the letter from the envelope and skimmed its contents. There was only one line: " *There is a fox, on Qishui dam it roams, slow and alone. My heart is sad, for he hath no clothes* ."

You Miao nearly tripped at the sight of that handwriting—it belonged to Sun Yu.

He had transcribed Sun Yu's books for years, and could not be more familiar with the copybook-like writing. He sat by the edge of the corridor right then and there to carefully chew on the deeper meaning of Sun Yu sending him this particular poetry verse.

There is a fox, on Qishui dam it roams, slow and alone. My heart is sad, for he hath no clothes…

This was a line from the "Book of Songs," describing a fox trotting unhurriedly and absentmindedly by the shore. A woman was singing from the other shore, worrying that her faraway husband might not have enough to wear…

You Miao vaguely understood, somewhat. Was Sun Yu telling him not to rush to the Yang Prefectural Office, and to simply observe from "the other shore"?

He folded the letter, knowing that he and Sun Yu shared the same mind. As a teacher, he would tidy up the mess of the current situation for You Miao. So at a time like this, he must not be impatient. Having gained Sun Yu's silent permission, You Miao felt more confident. He continued on his way to the main hall.

No one was speaking inside; everyone sat stiffly as if they were wooden puppets, and as soon as You Miao entered, the puppets all began to move. You Dechuan looked a little hopeful and a little relieved; his expression started out complicated, but then settled to stiffened.

"Miao-zi." Madam Wang immediately sprang to her feet and smiled.

"Dad." You Miao nodded to You Dechuan first before he greeted Madam Wang coolly, "Yiniang."

Li Zhifeng could tell You Miao was feeling a little off and questioned him with his eyes. You Miao answered with a look that said he was fine, and sat down inside the main hall.

You Dechuan cleared his throat, looking as if he wanted to comment. Normally, in a situation like this, You Miao should at least give him a bow, yet his son simply went and sat so carelessly that You Dechuan couldn't do anything about it.

"Where's da-ge?" You Miao asked, acting like nothing was the matter. "You didn't come with him, Dad?"

Madam Wang quickly answered with an apologetic smile, "Your dad couldn't sleep well at all last night; he was churning with thoughts. He got up bright and early this morning. We may have missed your brother on the road."

"Oh." You Miao nodded. "Everything's all right over at Yang Prefecture?"

You Dechuan sighed. "Miao-zi, I can't believe you're able to manage the estate your mother left you this well."

"Yes, indeed," Madam Wang said with a smile. "Truly, what a rich place, with such good fengshui. I already said years back that it's obvious Miao-zi is a man who'll do great things. And see, it's only been a few years and — "

“It’s all thanks to Li Zhifeng’s help,” You Miao cut her off with a smile of his own. “At the beginning, I almost gave up on this place. He’s the one who helped me build it up, bit by bit.”

Li Zhifeng acted as though he didn’t hear the praise as he focused on pouring tea.

You Miao laughed teasingly at him. “Hey.”

“Mn.”

Li Zhifeng placed a teacup in front of You Miao, and You Miao picked it up and drank its contents. Their shared moment only spelled awkwardness for Madam Wang and You Dechuan.

The gears in Madam Wang’s head turned, and she tried again, cheerfully, “Miao-zi, now that you’re back, you’re going to be granted a high official position — ”

“How many people have fled the north?” You Dechuan cut Madam Wang off and questioned You Miao. “When will His Majesty and His Highness the Crown Prince return to the imperial court?”

“We’re probably the last wave, there’s no one else after us,” You Miao replied. “The two emperors are currently in Tartar hands in Yanbian. Did Jiangnan not receive any news?”

You Dechuan sighed. “There’s talk indeed, but I’d never thought things would end up like this.”

You Miao nodded slowly as the pair sank into silence.

“I heard your former teacher has welcomed back His Highness the Third Prince. The country cannot be without a ruler for even a day; the imperial court has to regroup,” You Dechuan said. When You Miao only gave a “mn” in response, he continued, “Now is the time to exert yourself for the country. Once you’ve recovered, it’ll be time to go to your teacher.”

Well, it’s Sun Yu who told me not to go over , You Miao thought inwardly, accidentally spacing out for a moment. Li Zhifeng was sipping his

tea, but what You Dechuan said seemed to have stirred something in him, and he glanced at You Miao.

Once again, silence befell the hall. Unable to sit still, You Dechuan said, rising to his feet, “Let me take a look at Ke-er’s manor.”

“Guangwu,” You Miao called. “Lead the way and walk around the garden with my dad.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it.” You Dechuan waved. “I’m just going to walk around randomly.”

He left the courtyard on his own, but didn’t stray too far and only hung around the corridor to admire the flowers and the birds. Madam Wang was still nervously sitting inside the hall, but the mere sight of her irritated You Miao, so he pretended that she wasn’t present and that he was an idle man. After some contemplation, his mind went to You Dechuan’s visit. For the old man to visit the son, he supposed that it was an apology of sorts; he couldn’t pull a long face the whole time and should at least keep them for dinner.

“Is dinner being prepared?” he asked Li Zhifeng.

“Not yet. I’ll go give the order,” Li Zhifeng replied. “What do you want to eat?”

It occurred to You Miao that Anlu must be in utter chaos at the moment, and the markets were probably all gone. If he wanted to eat vegetables, he would have to make purchases in the south.

“What’s in stock at home?” he asked.

Li Zhifeng had only just returned the day before, but he had already done inventory of the storage. “There’s meat. Chicken, duck, goose, and rabbits. There’s also fish and prawns. No shortage of grain.”

Reassured, You Miao said, “Send someone to tell Zhu Tang to bring two fish; we’re keeping Dad and Yiniang for dinner tonight. Open a jug of wine from the cellar.”

“Understood.”

Li Zhifeng left to give instructions and make arrangements, leaving only You Miao and Madam Wang inside the hall. You Dechuan was still admiring flowers in the front yard, so You Miao turned to Madam Wang.

“How are things at the other estate?”

Madam Wang had been in a daze, but as soon as she heard You Miao talking to her, her lips curled upward. Yet when she realized the subject was Sunshower Tea Estate, her face dimmed, pulling a miserable expression. You Miao almost spat out his tea watching the many changes.

“It’s fallen apart,” Madam Wang said grimly. “That day, the soldiers came before we knew it, and Pei County was overtaken that very night. Your brother was able to keep calm, and he protected me and your dad. We escaped in a hurry…”

You Miao’s mind wandered as he listened. He had seen for himself the current state of Sunshower Tea Estate; he knew what had happened. Presumably, the moment news had reached Tea Horse Road, every household emptied and everyone in Liu Prefecture fled south. Thank goodness that You Hange was at the estate — if things had been as they were years ago, where he was in the capital and there was no principal son watching out for things at home, it would’ve been a matter of days before You Dechuan was robbed of all family assets, captured by the Barbarians, and dragged to Pei City.

“I heard the Barbarians set a fire,” Madam Wang said as she wiped her tears. “And burned all of our tea plantations, apparently in the fear that General Nie would ambush them. Your yiniang and your brother, we’re not afraid. We lived through poverty all those years back, after all. When I was younger, I’d set up shop on the streets to sell tofu. I told your dad that there are ways to live while poor, and ways to live while rich… But your dad couldn’t take it and fell very ill when we got back.”

“Didn’t you carry anything from the estate with you?” You Miao questioned, cutting Madam Wang off.

Madam Wang shook her head in dismay. You Miao stole a glance outside and saw You Dechuan admiring the rockeries Li Zhifeng had hauled back. He knew then that You Dechuan could hear their every word. When he thought further about it, it all suddenly came clear.

He'd assumed Madam Wang had something she'd been meaning to say, and lo and behold, there it was. She was here to give him a sob story… in order to move into his estate?

You Miao asked, "Is everyone from the other estate staying in Yang Prefectural City right now?"

"What 'everyone'?" Madam Wang smiled bitterly. "There's only your brother, your dad, and me left. Thank goodness Master Qiao is a good man and gave us a place to live. Miao-zi, I have something to tell you from the bottom of my heart…"

You Miao had a feeling Madam Wang was about to ask for forgiveness now.

Sure enough, Madam Wang turned to You Miao, sniffling and brimming with tears. "Miao-zi, back then at the estate, I was at fault. I was poor for years, so I grew too arrogant after marrying your dad. When I think about it now, it's sometimes all about fate. I've wronged you and your dad. Your dad hasn't been in good health recently, and now there's all these horrible things happening. Being the bullishly stubborn man that he is, your dad says it's just bad karma, and he doesn't want to drag you down. But I keep thinking about your brother; I can't relax. Your brother isn't a learned man like you; not someone with ideas and plans. He's someone who has no thoughts of his own. And then we heard you're going to be a high official now that you're back, and that His Highness thinks the highest of you. Since His Highness is back, he'll become our emperor in Jiangnan — "

You Miao stole another look outside. You Dechuan was still standing there in the yard pretending to have heard nothing. He cut Madam Wang off, not letting her ramble on further, and questioned, "Sunshower Tea Estate's land deed is safe, right?"

Madam Wang didn't know the answer, and only shook her head blankly.

You Miao then asked, "Does da-ge have a job in Yang Prefectural City?"

Cheer immediately returned to Madam Wang's face. "We're south-fleeing refugees; every penny spent is a penny gone. If it wasn't for Master Qiao helping out, where would your brother go to make a living with how he is? I wanted him to see if he could find work at the pier. After all, he's gotten by all these years through hard labor. Your brother thinks the same too, but your dad couldn't bear to lower his status. He's worried that he'll be laughed at, so he said to wait for you to come back first—"

"Enough!" You Dechuan exclaimed angrily from the outside.

Madam Wang shut up nervously. You Miao was a clever man, though. From her speech alone, he could tell that even the "enough" had been planned.

You Dechuan came back in and You Miao personally brewed him tea. He held up the cup and brought it over to You Dechuan. You Dechuan glanced at the cup, and anguish seemed to fill him once more — You Miao knew he recognized the set of Ruyao cups, which were part of You Miao's mother's dowry, and it had stirred feelings inside of him.

"Is the land deed with you?" You Miao asked again.

"In all that chaos, who knows which chest it got stuffed in," You Dechuan said. "I'll dig for it when I get back. All the northern hills were burned, and now they're occupied by the Barbarians too — who knows how many years it'll take before we can return? It'll be hard."

You Miao didn't say any more. A moment later, You Dechuan added, "I've been worried about you since hearing about the Tartars marching southward back in the twelfth month. I tried a few times to send people to the capital to bring you home, but I didn't think the roads would be blocked…"

“Mn.” You Miao nodded. “Other than the ones that had already left, all the officials were captured by the Tartars later.”

You Miao gave a brief account of what had happened in Da’an, knowing that You Dechuan must have tried to inquire for news already. Nonetheless, what he had heard from the south-retreating rich gentry couldn’t compare to how much more complete You Miao’s story was. You Dechuan was gravely affected listening to him and couldn’t speak for the longest time, the hand holding the teacup frozen midway.

“Your mom is watching over you in the heavens,” You Dechuan said, heaving a heavy sigh in the end.

You Miao gave a smile. After having survived so much, he was no longer his past self and wouldn’t say anything that would ridicule You Dechuan. Li Zhifeng shortly returned, after having arranged dinner. That night, You Miao kept You Dechuan for a meal, but refused to talk of anything that mattered. Qiao Jue showed up as well, so Li Zhifeng joined in and took a seat at the table that was set in the garden. Once the meal was over, You Miao instructed a boy servant to bring over a lantern and sent You Dechuan back to Yang Prefectural City.

[Chapter 38]

Right after he saw You Dechuan off, You Miao went straight to the bamboo courtyard in the back. Qiao Jue was a little tipsy from drink and was washing his face with the assistance of maids.

“Xiao-jiu, how much money do we have left?” You Miao asked as soon as he walked in.

Qiao Jue chuckled. “I was actually thinking of showing you the books one of these days, but was worried you hadn’t recovered from your fatigue. Come, come.” He ordered for the lamps to be lit, and then added, “Some of them are with Li Zhifeng.”

Li Zhifeng also brought over a case, and the three sat in the small Tingzhuhai courtyard. The bamboo rustled in the wind beyond the walls, and as Qiao Jue brewed tea, fragrance of it diffused into the air and

encircled them. As he sat there enthroned with millions in family riches, You Miao felt nothing but pleased!

"I exchanged all fourteen thousand and four hundred silver bills you had Guangwu bring back last year into proper silver. They're in the storeroom," Li Zhifeng said.

Recalling all the ill-gotten profit he and Ping Xi had joined hands and made when the major households in the capital were making a run for the south, You Miao instantly became excited.

Li Zhifeng continued, "The total annual yield of the estate is four thousand and four hundred silver. There were already seven thousand bushels of grain saved from before, but with last year's flood, the granary was opened for relief efforts, and three thousand bushels were released. Now there are four thousand bushels…"

You Miao ran through the estate's yield and income once, then gave Li Zhifeng a number for the amount of fluid cash he could use, which came to a total of twenty-five thousand silver.

After that was done, it was Qiao Jue's turn. Qiao Jue managed the four storefronts in Yang Prefectural City, and their profits were counted separately. Qiao Jue had always loved to buy low and sell high, to buy and sell at a profit, and the four stores grew bigger and bigger in business. The year before, he'd even acquired a large property on the main street with the intent to rebuild it as a restaurant. Tallying everything together with the profit from Jiangbei's tea plantation, there was over ten thousand silver.

Adding both You Miao and Qiao Jue's sides together and rounding the numbers, there was a whole forty thousand silver.

You Miao couldn't stop marveling at the amount, but Qiao Jue only laughed. "You managed to scoop up fourteen thousand in just three months at the capital; I worked my ass off for a year and only made seven or eight thousand. It's still easier to make stacks as an official these days after all."

You Miao grinned. "One travels a thousand miles to become an official only for the sake of wealth… Why else do you think so many

people fight so hard to squeeze themselves into the political scene?”

The pair burst out laughing.

You Miao tucked the ledgers away and told Qiao Jue to prepare money for purchasing the spring season’s seeds, then headed back to his bedchamber with Li Zhifeng. He pulled on Li Zhifeng’s hand as they went, but as they passed through the long corridor, he sat down and gazed up at the twinkling starry sky, mesmerized.

“What are you thinking about?” Li Zhifeng asked.

You Miao was a little surprised. It was very rare for Li Zhifeng to ask after him like this; so proactively. He glanced at him. “Thinking about you, thinking about me, thinking about home, country, and the world.”

“Nie Dan told me to join the government and take up a position,” Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao was shocked. “How come he never told me that?”

Li Zhifeng didn’t answer, and only looked at You Miao. You Miao nudged him. “Do you want to go?”

“I declined,” Li Zhifeng replied impassively.

You Miao nodded. If Li Zhifeng entered the government, he could only become a military officer, and being an officer meant entering the battlefield to kill. Considering Li Zhifeng’s abilities, You Miao wasn’t concerned for his safety. But when it came to his identity, he was first and foremost not a Han; it would be rather unfair to ask him to carry the burden of the Han nation’s fate.

Not to mention the cost of losing the war was losing one’s head. Of course, Zhao Chao wouldn’t dare to execute him, but if he exerted the effort for Tianqi and lost the war, he would still have to receive punishment — and that’d be kinda shitty. Nie Dan was most likely taken by Li Zhifeng’s abilities and his experience fighting the Barbarians.

“Why did you come back that day?” You Miao asked. “Was it because you missed me?”

Li Zhifeng sat on the railing and leaned against the pillar, so You Miao shuffled over. His eyes trailed up from Li Zhifeng’s chest, and he gave him a peck on the lips.

Li Zhifeng stared into You Miao’s eyes as their lips parted and said, “Half of it was because I missed you. The other half was because you and the others kneeled to me at the Lan Pass.”

“…”

It was only now that You Miao realized their prostration in the snow had so moved Li Zhifeng’s heart.

“To be honest, there’s nothing wrong with taking command of the army,” You Miao said. “In fact, I do want you to go… It’s just, Tianqi isn’t in a position to make you give your life up for it.”

Li Zhifeng gazed at the rolling pitch-black hills of the quiet night, lost in thought. Eventually, he said, “I want to drive the Jie out, too — at least not have them camped across the shore. We can’t sleep well at night otherwise.”

You Miao laughed, now understanding what Li Zhifeng was thinking, and nodded. “Let me try to come up with an idea. Find a day to invite Zhao Chao and Nie Dan over, and we’ll talk about it.”

“We’ll need to raise private armed forces too,” Li Zhifeng added.

That was actually true, and the mention of it reminded You Miao. There’d been something nagging at him that wasn’t yet crossed off his to-do list, and the idea vaguely came to him when they were checking the ledgers yesterday. But he’d never been involved in battle before; he had no idea how many men he would have to keep in order to protect the estate.

“Two hundred men,” Li Zhifeng said. “Let me train them, and it’ll be enough for self-defense.”

“But the Barbarians all come in tens of thousands each time. Is two hundred men enough?” You Miao asked.

“Yes,” Li Zhifeng replied impassively. “Fighting a war isn’t to exchange a life for a life, it’s to ensure everyone lives.”

You Miao was reassured after hearing Li Zhifeng say so. Although two hundred was already extremely large for a personal army in Jiangnan, You Miao had worked in an administrative position in the Capital Army before and knew that keeping two hundred men was not any sort of burden for his current financial situation.

“Where do we find the people?” You Miao asked.

“We buy them,” Li Zhifeng replied. “From the Yang Prefectural City’s market.”

You Miao made an affirmative noise. Truthfully, if Li Zhifeng was willing, taking the role of a commanding officer in the Defense Army would’ve actually been a very good decision. Collecting the country’s money while protecting his own estate; it’d all be wrapped up nicely. However, the present situation was still unclear and he couldn’t put too much hope on Nie Dan; it was no use relying on anyone, they had to rely on themselves first.

Yet driving the Barbarians away wasn’t an easy feat, either. War needed soldiers, and he didn’t know how many soldiers were left. He knew at least one thing, though—Sun Yu hadn’t yet given the dispatch order, which only proved that the current situation was veritably very tricky.

Perhaps Jiangnan only had enough power to defend itself now, and everything else would have to be left to time alone. Fortunately, after the great battle from the night before, the Jie had realized that the natural moat of the Yangtze River was hard to besiege, so they had no choice but to retreat back to Pei County and hold their position on Tea Horse Road to wait for reinforcements from the north.

Neither side had delivered a letter of challenge to war, nor was there any talk of negotiating treaties. The Five Barbarian Tribes were

watching covetously from the north shore, and all of a sudden, Riverwave Estate became the front-most line in all of Jiangnan.

Days later, You Miao prepared to make a trip to Yang Prefectural City. Of course, with Sun Yu's instructions, he wouldn't step a foot inside the prefectural government office so rashly. The reason for his trip was to poke around for news of the government and check on his own stores, while Li Zhifeng would be off to buy people at the market.

Tilling and sowing had begun at the estate, and the tenants had returned one after the other. When they saw You Miao pass by, they straightened up to greet him.

"Shaoye! The Barbarians won't invade, would they?!" someone shouted.

"It's fine!" You Miao reassured with a smile. "I'm here! They won't dare!"

"Shaoye is a Tanhua now! Give us blessings for a good harvest, eh!"

"For sure!" You Miao answered. "This year will be another good harvest year!"

The estate's atmosphere was as it had always been, and nothing much was different aside from a few rumors about the north shore. The two suspension bridges had been abandoned; dismantled by Li Zhifeng after the last clash. Atop the cliff next to the shore stood a tall wooden watchtower to monitor any movement from the other side.

The boats had withdrawn back to Jiangnan, and the markets of Guozhuang Village had replaced Anlu in becoming the center of goods aggregation and distribution. You Miao strolled a few times around Guozhuang's markets first and discovered that grain had almost doubled in price. In a time of war when there was an immense exodus to the south, no doubt the price of everything local would inflate. Fortunately, Riverwave Estate could self-produce fish, rice, vegetables, and oil. And in accordance

with Qiao Jue's intent, they would hoard grain for now instead of underselling.

You Miao had passed a number of villages on the way to Yang Prefectural City, and the closer he got, the more out-of-towners there were. He often saw disheveled and unkempt northern refugees who'd built temporary bamboo sheds along both sides of the official road. It was in this way that he wandered all the way to Yang Prefectural City. The security there was an utter mess, and after You Miao entered the gates, he was thoroughly shocked.

People were everywhere!

He'd thought Yang Prefectural City was lively before; now, it had transformed into a massive refugee camp. Along the waterways, the alleyways — as long as it was somewhere habitable, there were people crammed in. The streets teemed with businesses, and even the major houses seemed to have tripled in number of inhabitants.

"There's so many people?" You Miao muttered in disbelief.

"Ever since the first lost battle in the north, there's been more and more," Li Zhifeng replied.

The entire main street was so cacophonous that You Miao was going deaf, and he had to yell to be heard. There were pedestrians blocking the road and their horse couldn't pass through at all. Someone else was also yelling ahead; it sounded like they were from a government vehicle.

A fairly large market had formed at the west end of the city along the sides of the waterway, and not far from it was a campground packed with civilians.

"You." Li Zhifeng was riding on horseback, and he pointed at someone who was sitting on the side of the street. "Come with me."

The man immediately stood up—along with everyone else around him.

“M’lord! Are you hirin’?”

“M’lord! Grant a bite to eat!”

It was as though every person in their immediate radius had received the command. They all got up and swarmed their horses while Li Zhifeng picked people out as he went. You Miao was stuck on the road alone for nearly two hours, and it took until nearly evening before he made it through the congestion to cross the river. He almost couldn’t recognize the streets of Yang Prefectural City anymore.

At the end, Li Zhifeng dismounted his horse and gave instructions to one of the men he picked out, telling him to take the group back to Riverwave Estate and have Qiao Jue settle them. Then with the reins in hand, he led the horses through the streets and alleys. After turning a corner, they finally arrived at Riverwave Estate’s stores.

The four shops were connected, occupying the best spot in Yang Prefectural City. There used to be an empty lot in the city center, but Qiao Jue had purchased it with plans to build the largest restaurant in the entire city. When Qiao Jue did business in Yang Prefectural City in the past, he was never truly confident — but when You Miao gained the Tanhua title, Riverwave Estate’s name became renowned across the entire Jiangnan region. With his spine toughened, he could act as he willed—any property he wished to purchase, any business he wished to conduct, the papers all flew past the red tape, since no one dared block his way.

You Miao had only ever come by the stores once, and it was when Qiao Jue first opened shop. Frankly, at the time, he’d just shelled out the money to Qiao Jue after inspecting the area. He assumed Qiao Jue was only running these businesses for fun, so he didn’t really care what went on. Now that he was here, he discovered that said businesses had grown to a massive extent!

One rice shop, one oil shop, one shop for tea and honey and other estate specialties, and one shop for fresh ocean goods from the harbor as well as other goods friends and relatives had entrusted them to sell; a

general store of sorts. You Miao entered the rice shop first; it was already getting dark out and the clerks were unloading the rice bags.

"We're done for the day!" shouted the store manager. "All the rice today is sold out! Go to a different store!"

"I'm not here to buy…" You Miao said.

The manager emerged and came face to face with You Miao. Neither knew each other, but when he saw Li Zhifeng behind You Miao, he immediately plastered his face with smiles to welcome him.

"Butler Feng! What brings you here today? I hear you just returned from the north, why aren't you resting more at the estate…? Come, please have a seat, have a seat…"

Li Zhifeng shielded You Miao protectively and let him enter the shop first. Then he said to the manager, "This is the young master."

The manager blinked, then nodded. You Miao knew he didn't get it, and reckoned that the man was wondering *"Which young master?"* Before the manager could open his mouth, You Miao spoke up with a chuckle.

" *Your* young master, of course. How many young masters are there in the estate?"

Only then did the manager come around, and he quickly exclaimed, stunned, "Lord You! No, I meant, shaoye! The young master is here!"

Instantly, all four stores were startled, and the clerks swarmed out to surround the entrance of the rice shop. You Miao hastily told them not be alarmed and to return to their stations, that he would be visiting every single one, before starting the inspection with the rice shop.

The people outside didn't know why this place was suddenly bustling, so they all tried to poke their heads in to see what was up. Li Zhifeng had someone shoo the onlookers away while You Miao asked after the price of grain and went to inspect the warehouse.

The manager explained as he accompanied You Miao on his tour, “Right now, more and more people are buying rice. We can sell up to a thousand pounds a day.”

“What’s the price?” You Miao asked.

“Two hundred and eighty coins for every ten grams,” the manager replied. “At its highest, the price inflated to four hundred coins in Yang Prefectural City. Afterward, the government released word that rice must not be allowed to inflate any higher. Master Sun also personally went around to ask after the rice shops in the city before the price of rice was pushed down.”

You Miao nodded. “Don’t oversell in a day.”

The manager replied, “Every day, from opening in the morning to closing at night, there are always many people in line to buy rice. Anyone who wants to buy grain in Yang Prefectural City right now has to come queue bright and early before the store’s even open.”

You Miao mentally counted the amount of grain stored at the estate, and Li Zhifeng spoke up.

“After the spring sowing, there will be harvest again. No need to worry.”

You Miao answered with a “mn,” and Li Zhifeng led him by hand to the next store. The oil shop’s business was also flaming, and a different manager came to welcome them. There were still people in line inside the store; the oil and rice shops were different, and this one was open until late at night.

There were fewer customers inside the tea and honey shop. Taking a swift sweep of the fourth store, You Miao gave the manager there a quick heads-up that he wouldn’t be heading over there anymore and settled inside the tea shop for a break. As soon as he sat, Li Zhifeng brought over camellia honey for him to try. The four managers took this time to come over with their hands folded to hear instructions. You Miao paid them some words of compliment before sending them back to their posts.

Huang Dayou, the manager of the tea shop who remained, asked, “What plans do shaoye and Butler Feng have for the night?”

“Send someone to reserve a suite in Hongyun Pavilion,” Li Zhifeng ordered. “We’ll be staying the night in Yang Prefectural City today.”

“Butler Feng, Hongyun Pavilion is full,” Huang Dayou said. “It’s occupied by those who have come down from the north, and they’re from major houses, too…”

“It’s fine,” You Miao said. “I see the inner yard behind the shops is pretty big. Are there vacant rooms? Tidy one up and Li Zhifeng and I will spend the night. Where’s my dad and the others?”

“Master You is also staying in the inner yard,” the manager replied. “The inner yards of the four shops are connected; just head out to the patio in the back and it’s there. At this hour, I imagine the Master You must be out taking a walk.”

You Miao nodded. He then asked whether You Dechuan was taking charge of the businesses, and the manager didn’t know how to answer for the moment.

Li Zhifeng spoke up, “The young master is asking, so just tell the truth.”

Only then did the manager say, shaking his head, “Master Qiao has instructed…”

You Miao nodded in understanding, gesturing that he didn’t need to say anymore. It was within expectations that Qiao Jue wouldn’t let You Dechuan poke his nose in the shops’ business, which was just as well.

The employees of the four stores began to bustle about, and Li Zhifeng personally went to buy the saltwater duck dish famous to Yang Prefectural City. While strolling around the courtyard, You Miao noticed Madam Washing clothes by the well and couldn’t help but frown at the sight. When Madam Wang looked up and saw You Miao, she was surprised.

“Miao-zi! Gosh Miao-zi, why are you here?”

Amused, You Miao said, “It’s my store, so of course I’d come.”

Madam Wang turned and called out behind her, “Hange! Hange! Your little brother’s here to see you!”

You Hange was wearing a long blue tunic and his feet were bare. At Madam Wang’s call, he frantically ran out without bothering to put on shoes, but only stared at You Miao blankly, not saying a single word.

You Miao knew the argument they had days ago was still on his mind, but You Miao wasn’t really a guy who minded such things, easy-going as he was.

“Have you eaten?” You Miao asked casually.

“No…not yet.” You Hange was feeling a little uncomfortable. “Dad went to buy some dishes to go with the wine. Why’d you come?”

“Go chat with your little brother, he’s here just to see you,” Madam Wang chided cheerfully.

Who’s here “just to see him”? Black can turn white when you’re the one talking , You Miao thought, but decided not to say anything. You Hange, however, immediately went back inside to put on his shoes and properly fixed himself up before re-emerging.

“Let’s go sit out front?” You Miao suggested.

By the looks of it, You Hange’s anger from a few days ago had cooled and he was a little embarrassed in front of You Miao.

“Where are the maids?” You Miao asked. “Why is your mom washing clothes herself?”

“They’ve all gone,” You Hange replied. “It’s fine, she can do it.”

You Miao remembered the conversation they had back at the estate as he sat down with You Hange. “Did dad salvage any money during his

escape?”

You Hange smiled. “He did. Money is the one thing you don’t have to worry about.”

You Miao held a fairly good impression of this cheap brother of his —a fter all, the year he left home, You Hange had given him two pouches of money.

As they sat at the tea table in the yard, You Miao asked, “Why not buy a house? And a couple of maids for service?”

You Hange replied, sounding resigned, “You might not know this, but with the current prospects, there’s no buying a house in Yang Prefectural City no matter how much money you have.”

The brothers fell silent. You Hange spoke up again a moment later.

“Di…didi.”

You Miao was brewing tea, and the address made him raise his eyebrows. He looked up and saw You Hange speak with full sincerity.

“I was overly rash with my words the other day. Don’t take it to heart,” he said.

“It’s fine.” You Miao laughed. “I never did in the first place.”

“I want to discuss something with you,” You Hange continued.

You Miao motioned for him to speak and absentmindedly sized up the yard as he drank his tea. You Hange regarded him for a moment and a smile sprouted suddenly.

“Didi, you’re not quite the same as before,” he commented.

“How so?” You Miao asked, a little baffled.

“You’re like an official.” You Hange then added, “Last year, when I got news from Riverwave Estate that you’d achieved Tanhua in the ninth

month, and then imperial censor in the eleventh month, I was genuinely happy for you."

You Miao gave him a smile. He poured a cup of tea and placed it in front of You Hange, but didn't comment. Abruptly, he noticed that You Hange was watching him with eyes tinged with fear and unfamiliarity. It was then that You Miao realized he had subconsciously treated You Hange with the act he'd always pulled in the political scene and had made him distant. He quickly smiled in an appeasing way.

"Da-ge, if you have anything to ask of me, I will definitely help as long as it's within my abilities to do so."

"We're family. There shouldn't really be a need to speak of helping," You Hange said derisively. "It's about our dad."

You Miao had initially thought You Hange would ask him to say a few nice words for him in front of Zhao Chao and land him an official position within the Yang Prefecture government. Unexpectedly, the subject You Hange brought up instead was You Dechuan. You Miao didn't interrupt and only quietly listened.

"The day Dad abandoned the estate, the tea plantations were all burned," You Hange started. "There's nothing that can be done when a country encounters something like this, but our dad is getting on in years and there are some things that he's not able to let go of so quickly. Thankfully, Uncle Qiao was here to take us in, but Dad also fell really ill a few times…"

All this talk rounded back to the same thing Madam Wang spoke of last time, but You Miao didn't interrupt him.

"Dad has often thought of you during our stay here," You Hange continued. "The shops are always noisy and full of people, too, and he usually can't sleep well at night. I want to beg you to let Dad move to Riverwave Estate, just for a few days. Mom and I will still stay here in the store. At the end of the day, it's because I'm so useless that you're saddled with these needless burdens… Gosh."

“Don’t say anymore,” You Miao said. “I know.”

Taken aback, You Hange raised his head to look at You Miao. But You Miao simply continued to drink his tea, deliberating. Gradually, he remembered how well You Hange had treated him in the past. That day in Da’an, he’d questioned whether You Dechuan would recognize him as his son and produce the money if he was held for ransom.

Thinking it over and over, You Miao felt he would probably never understand You Dechuan’s mind. But based on the way he thought, he probably would have done it.

So at a time like this, it was perfectly normal to take him in.

Li Zhifeng returned around dusk, and so did You Dechuan, who was surprised to see You Miao. You Miao ordered for dinner to be served, ready to have the meal together with the family. Li Zhifeng washed his hands and went to make an additional dish for You Miao. You Miao had been sitting in the yard for a long time at this point, chatting with You Hange, but all the subjects wound up revolving around the past. Digging deeper did nothing but vex him, so he made excuses to go to the kitchen to check on the food.

Li Zhifeng was cracking eggs to make a steamed egg for You Miao. When You Miao entered, he hugged him around the waist from behind.

Li Zhifeng tilted his head and said, “What is it? Playing cute again?”

You Miao snorted and laughed.

“Something on your mind?” Li Zhifeng asked.

You Miao answered with a “mn” and proceeded to tell Li Zhifeng what You Hange had told him.

“Don’t all you Hans talk of filial piety? Let him come live at the estate,” Li Zhifeng said, sounding indifferent.

You Miao sighed. “Sometimes I wonder if my dad would be willing to pay my ransom if I didn’t have you and was detained again in Da’an.”

Li Zhifeng placed the whipped eggs inside the steaming basket, then asked as he wiped his hands, “If he were the one captured instead, would *you* ransom him?”

“Of course,” You Miao said. “He’s my old man.”

Li Zhifeng said quietly, “Then of course he’d be willing to ransom you. Because you’re his son.”

You Miao was suddenly a little moved; he had to admit Li Zhifeng had a point. And it was also this response that allowed him to understand Li Zhifeng a little more—perhaps deep down, he’d always hoped for a family like Hans commonly had. It wasn’t just You Miao, but also You Miao’s family and You Miao’s world that attracted him so.

As night fell, the clerks served a full table of dishes. You Miao learned from the manager that even the shops had barely any rooms to live in; You Dechuan, Madam Wang, and You Hange were all crammed in a two-room chamber in the side wing. In the evenings, the family would provide food for themselves; Madam Wang would cook and they’d have dinner in the narrow and dim room on the side.

After You Miao emerged from the kitchen, the meal was served and the dishes came flowing out like water. He took the head seat unrepentantly. As he poured wine for You Dechuan, he flashed a smile.

“Dad, why don’t you move to the estate in a few days?” he said.

You Dechuan seemed moved as he stared at You Miao, yet he couldn’t speak. In the end, he said at last, “Forget it, forget it, it’s you young people’s world now. I’ll just stay here in Yang Prefectural City.”

“Dad!” You Hange frowned. “Since didi has spoken, don’t say anymore.”

You Dechuan shot a glance at You Hange.

You Miao added, “Why don’t auntie and da-ge move to the estate too, and take care of Dad? The city is too busy and not quiet at all. You can simply go into town any time if you want to.”

Li Zhifeng had been silent this entire time and focused only on eating, but said as he put a piece of duck meat in You Miao’s bowl, “Move on in, Uncle You. Ziqian often worries about all of you.”

Conflicted, You Miao glanced at Li Zhifeng. Although he felt a little embarrassed, he admitted that what Li Zhifeng said had been said just right. Sure enough, You Dechuan put down his chopsticks and nodded.

“I just want to see the place your mother loved before she died. It’s been so many years. I was the one who wronged her.”

It would’ve been fine if You Dechuan hadn’t said that, but because he did, You Miao’s eyes grew red around the rims in spite of himself. *Old man, you finally realize the errors of your ways* , he thought.

After dinner, You Miao sent someone to pass on the message to the estate, and the next day, Cheng Guangwu showed up driving a carriage with a team of boy servants in tow. They loaded all of You Dechuan’s belongings onto the vehicle while You Miao personally beckoned You Dechuan to mount the carriage.

The people all along the streets watched for a long time, and talk soon filled the neighborhoods, praising You Miao as a good filial son. Some of the elderly folk in the city knew of You Dechuan’s character, and how years ago he had installed a second principal son. Thus, You Miao became a model for them to discipline their own sons. When You Miao caught wind of what was being spread around the streets, he at last felt fortunate that he didn’t ditch You Dechuan in Yang Prefectural City in a fit of petulance. Not only did welcoming You Dechuan to the estate end You Miao’s indecision, he also earned a good reputation for “filial piety.” You Dechuan didn’t eat or spend that much, the estate was single-handedly built up by You Miao, and Qiao Jue was in charge—there was no fear at all of the Wang mother and son robbing him of his property.

When they arrived at Shen Garden, Qiao Jue came out personally to welcome them. Back when You Miao's life and death was unknown and Qiao Jue couldn't get You Miao's opinion, he'd given You Dechuan a bit of a cold shoulder and refused him refuge at the estate; instead giving him the simple small room at the shops. Now that You Miao had personally brought him back, Qiao Jue changed his attitude, beaming as he spoke to You Dechuan. While the luggage was being unloaded, however, he tugged Li Zhifeng to the side to whisper.

"How should I settle them?" Qiao Jue asked. "You threw hundreds of men at me yesterday; I couldn't possibly have them all stay at Shen Garden, so I sent them to the abandoned mansion on the west side."

"Why don't you have them stay in the side courtyard at the foot of the west hill? It's quiet there," Li Zhifeng said. "Don't worry about anyone else, I'll take care of it."

Qiao Jue nodded, and Li Zhifeng personally led You Dechuan to the side courtyard to make arrangements. The walk from that courtyard to the main hall would take at least an hour, so they wouldn't need to worry that You Dechuan would stroll over too often.

You Miao watched as You Hange unloaded their things. There were seven large chests in the carriage, while You Dechuan personally carried a locked copper case. You Miao knew that every bit of money his father had saved over the years was in that case, he just didn't know how much was in it.

In the past, he had always assumed You Dechuan would never run out of money. But now that he was managing an estate himself, he was slowly learning how much profit was made through the yields. You Dechuan only produced tea and sold it in Liu Prefecture, so a little over ten thousand silver would be the peak. You Miao couldn't say You Dechuan that didn't spoil him when he sent him to the capital with thousands of silver back then.

As for the case in You Dechuan's possession, there had to be at least eighty thousand silver in bills.

Judging by You Hange's demeanor, he most likely didn't know how much money his father had. You Miao knew that money meant a great deal to You Dechuan; who knows, maybe he was guarding it from them—after all, the old man only had that to rely on. Thus, You Miao didn't attempt to pry information from You Dechuan about his wealth, pretending to be ignorant and taking him seeking refuge with his son to be due to poverty.

On the contrary, Li Zhifeng generously gave You Hange two hundred silver to provide for any household needs, and then sent Cheng Guangwu to purchase servants for their family of three.

"We won't be eating together, usually," Qiao Jue instructed. "Hire another hand for the kitchen to cook for my brother-in-law. He's getting on in years, too, so add supplements to his diet where needed. No need to spare the cost."

What he said sounded like consideration for You Dechuan on the surface, but in reality, it was so any need to join You Miao's table was eliminated and he'd stay in his own courtyard for his meals. You Miao found this hilarious, and continued to talk about it at dinner after settling You Dechuan, waving his chopsticks around and making his rice fly all over the place. There was a smile in Li Zhifeng's eyes, but he didn't say a word.

"I did want to scold him some," Qiao Jue said, "But was afraid that'd put you in an awkward position."

"Don't worry about it… This is fine," You Miao said. "It's okay for him to live here."

[Chapter 39]

That night, the arrival of a guest was announced while You Miao was reading inside the study.

It was Ping Xi who'd come, and Li Zhifeng kept him company in the main hall. You Miao was in the middle of transcribing from memory a book he'd already read thoroughly, and the announcement didn't make him bat an eye.

"Let him wait a bit longer," he said.

Now, whenever there were guests at Riverwave Estate, Li Zhifeng was the one who received them. Qiao Jue held no formal position, which meant he had to bow when government officials called; in light of this, he simply avoided them. Having Li Zhifeng receive guests spared all worries; the guests stayed silent and Li Zhifeng didn't talk, and this saved everyone from being drained by trying to make pleasantries—especially if it was someone they didn't know.

After finishing his work, You Miao emerged holding his still-drying copybook. Ping Xi was having tea with Li Zhifeng, and the moment he spotted You Miao, he stood up.

"Why didn't you join the Yang Prefectural Office?" he questioned.

"We just got back. I don't feel like moving a muscle," You Miao answered.

"We're all waiting for you," Ping Xi reasoned. "You're the only one missing from the fold. With you, the group will be complete."

You Miao grinned cheerily at Ping Xi as he went to take his seat.

Ping Xi persisted, "The capital's relocation has been decided. Li-xiongdi has also been cleared of his slave status. The Ministry of War is waiting for both of you to assume your positions."

You Miao and Li Zhifeng exchanged a look.

“You goin’?” You Miao asked him.

Li Zhifeng shook his head. “If you’re not, I’m not.”

You Miao smiled at Ping Xi. “Neither of us are going.”

Ping Xi’s face fell slightly, and he unconsciously re-evaluated his view of You Miao. You Miao tugged back his sleeve and reached for the tea, not caring what he thought.

“Did His Highness ask you to come?” he asked.

Ping Xi shook his head, so You Miao said, “My health hasn’t been the greatest lately, and my dad just moved into the estate. I need some time to care for my father…”

This rang a bell with Ping Xi, and he said, “I did hear about that in Yang Prefectural City yesterday — that you’ve let go of old grudges and welcomed your father home. I haven’t greeted uncle yet…”

You Miao’s lips twitched. “Don’t worry about it.”

Ping Xi felt inexplicably awkward, not knowing whether to sit or stand. You Miao cut straight to the point.

“Let’s stop playing at bureaucracy between the two of us. Other than wanting me go back to assume my position, what else did they say?”

“Not much.” Ping Xi had no choice but to confess the honest truth. “His Highness didn’t say anything. It was Li Yan who told me to come.”

“Tell Li Yan to come himself,” You Miao said.

“His injured leg isn’t fully recovered yet,” Ping Xi replied.

You Miao contemplated for a moment. He knew that Li Yan and the rest had sent Ping Xi because they’d heard about his trip to the city the day before.

“And what does His Highness say?”

“He and your teacher, as well as the Yang Prefectural Governor, are discussing the matter of the capital’s relocation. Everyone was there today except you,” Ping Xi said.

You Miao knew this meant Zhao Chao was being named as the new emperor, and asked, “When’s the coronation?”

“Not sure. There’s no money in the national treasury, so we have to withdraw funds from Yang Prefecture,” Ping Xi said. “The Ministry of War was the first department that got rebuilt; it’s all been reinstated. Zhao Chao told me to come find you two; he wants Li-xiongdi to take command of the army. General Nie was demoted a rank because of what happened previously, so there’s now a vacancy in the Yang Prefectural Defense Army…”

“Will the Hans be at ease having a foreigner take command of the internal army?” Li Zhifeng spoke up.

Silence fell in the room. After mulling it over, Ping Xi replied, “It was His Highness who suppressed all the objections.”

“Don’t bother,” You Miao said. “Neither of us want to enter the government right now.”

Ping Xi was a smart man himself, so he nodded in understanding. “If you aren’t willing, then let me ask you: do you have anyone to recommend for the Ministry of Personnel?”

You Miao shook his head after a brief moment of thought.

Ping Xi hesitated for a long time, then as if he’d made up his mind, he said at last, “Lend some money. Our bros sent me here to borrow some cash.”

Instantly, You Miao burst out laughing. He laughed so hard he knocked over his cup, and said as he got up, “You shoulda said you were here to borrow money sooner, instead of beating around the bush for so long.”

Seeing the sweat drenching Ping Xi's forehead, Li Zhifeng said, "I'll go get the money."

You Miao didn't ask him how much he was going to retrieve, and simply turned to Ping Xi. "Is there enough in Jiangnan's state treasury?"

"No," Ping Xi said. "Far from it. Gotta eat, gotta dress, gotta draft and train soldiers, gotta construct a palace… There's a whole bunch of things piled up, and they all need money. You don't see what it's like inside the government office; we're going insane with how busy we are."

Li Zhifeng returned in the middle of their conversation with five hundred silver bills. Ping Xi took the money and looked as if a heavy burden was lifted from his shoulders.

"Thanks so much for this. Expenses are enormous right now."

"You're welcome," You Miao said. "It's just, the estate doesn't have much money left, either… And my dad's estate was destroyed in the war; completely sacked…"

Ping Xi had no idea what You Miao's financial situation was like, so he hastily drafted a loan receipt. You Miao had wanted to keep him for the night, but Ping Xi was in a rush to be back the next morning to assign out work, so he quickly bade his farewell after giving his thanks.

Three days later, someone else came knocking. This time it was Lin Luoyang, who used to work in the Ministry of Justice. As soon as he sat down, he opened his mouth to ask for money. In the past few days, You Miao had calculated and made his plans—these noble sons were all shooting for government positions, and he wasn't worried that the money he loaned wouldn't be repaid, so he very generously lent the man five hundred silver. Soon after, Qin Shaonan came calling as well. Over the next many days, all the young men in Yang Prefecture whom You Miao had rescued came one after the other to borrow money, rolling up to the estate nonstop like cart wheels.

You Miao answered almost every single request, lending funds out in lumps of three or five hundred. In the early morning of the fifth day, Li

Yan himself showed up.

"How much do you need?" You Miao asked as soon as he took his seat.

Li Yan glanced at You Miao, but didn't speak. He then looked at Li Zhifeng. You Miao grinned cheekily at Li Yan. Back in Da'an, one of Li Yan's legs had been broken by the beatings. The bones hadn't been properly set during their hasty escape, and combined with their exhausting journey, he ended up with a minor disability upon their return. He would probably spend the rest of his life with a limp.

"Lend me some money to ransom your saozi," Li Yan said. "I will be crossing the river next month to negotiate with the Barbarians."

Hearing this, You Miao straightened up and faced Li Yan seriously. "How much?"

"Ten thousand silver," Li Yan said. "You got it?"

Instead of answering the question, You Miao asked back, "Do I look like I have that much?"

Li Yan heaved a long sigh and leaned on his cane somberly, not speaking. Li Zhifeng brought over a case and placed it in front of Li Yan. Li Yan opened it and took a look — there was one thousand silver in money bills inside.

"Thanks," Li Yan said to Li Zhifeng, then sighed again.

As the afternoon sun poured into the hall, You Miao abruptly realized that Li Yan seemed to have aged significantly. He was a young man, just over twenty years old and at the height of his prime, but he already had white hairs. When he entered the hall earlier with his cane, he looked practically like a hunched little old man.

"Why aren't you gunning for a position?" Li Yan asked.

"Don't wanna," You Miao replied. "I'm tired."

Li Yan stared at You Miao as if he didn't know him. With hesitation in his eyes, he carefully ventured, "Our bros are all waiting for you to join court, eh."

"We'll see." You Miao smiled. "You're all back now, so what room is there for me to show off?"

Li Yan chuckled derisively, shaking his head. "Little bugger. You're not simple," he said, his words laced with meaning.

You Miao knew that Li Yan had sensed it by now. In the past when they were in the capital, You Miao had always put on an act. The You Miao of today was his authentic self. He had to conceal himself in the past, but since their return, he didn't have to care for anyone aside from Sun Yu any longer—Zhao Chao included. It was on the basis of friendship alone that You Miao had loaned money to Li Yan, Qin Shaonan, Ping Xi, and the others. Li Yan was an intelligent man; it was impossible for him not to have realized this.

"I'll see if I can think of other ways," Li Yan added.

In the end, You Miao still cared for the old affection between them. He implored, "Why don't you stay and let Ping Xi go instead?"

"That bugger Ping Xi can handle some military affairs, but not negotiations," Li Yan said. "It's either me or your teacher. Political Advisor Sun is old, he can't personally attend the talks."

"Mn. Be careful out there. Just come back if anything doesn't seem right, don't force yourself," You Miao said.

Li Yan nodded and turned around, forlornness clouding his retreating figure. As You Miao watched him leave, an inexplicable feeling filled him, leaving him worried.

Spring had arrived; sowing this year was already delayed and they would miss the season if they didn't start. There was no one calling on the estate after Li Yan, so You Miao and Li Zhifeng began to farm, happy to be free of any duties.

The Barbarians in Jiangbei had retreated to Pei County, which allowed Riverwave Estate's tenant farmers to grow gutsier. Every so often, they would cross the river to Jiangbei to check on the state of things, and then return when they saw no sign or movement from the enemies. Qiao Jue even brought several boy servants with him to check on the tea growing in the northern hills. Worried for any unusual movements, however, You Miao divided the boy servants who practiced martial arts into four teams to patrol day and night.

These days, Li Zhifeng had been training the hundred-some private armed guards at the clearing in the Jiangbei part of the estate. He forged weapons at Guozhuang Village and even acquired horses. You Miao spent very generously when it came to this; he paid up whenever Li Zhifeng asked for money. Once in a while, he would go check on the training, and the sight of Li Zhifeng in leather armor leading the riding and shooting drills made him grin.

It had been very quiet north of Anlu Village; the Jie weren't encroaching anymore. Leaf-picking had started in Qiao Jue's tea plantations, and another month passed like this before news came from Yang Prefectural City: Zhao Chao was going to ascend the throne and become the emperor.

Ever since they had fought their way back to Jiangnan, Zhao Chao hadn't sent anyone to seek You Miao, nor had he come by himself. And it wasn't until Zhao Chao rallied Tianqi's government and was in preparation for a coronation next month that You Miao thought to write him.

During the day, Li Zhifeng trained the soldiers at the north shore and ate lunch with them. When he returned in the evening and removed his armor, he'd turn around and transform into the manor's butler, entering the kitchen to make You Miao some personal dishes.

When Li Zhifeng returned from training at dusk on this day, You Miao was taking care of the rapeseed plants in the backyard garden. After watching them for a bit, he turned to Li Zhifeng.

“I want to write to Zhao Chao. He’s going to take the throne next month,” he said.

When Li Zhifeng answered with a “mn,” You Miao continued, “Deliver the letter for me when I’m done writing it. Then wait and see if he has anything to say.”

Li Zhifeng nodded quietly in understanding.

They entered the study after dinner, and Li Zhifeng helped grind the ink while You Miao picked up the brush and deliberated on his words. When faced with this blank sheet of paper, he found himself at a sudden loss. It was a long time before he wrote down the words: *To my older brother, Zhao Chao.*

The relationship between Zhao Chao and You Miao now could certainly use this address. But what to write? Even You Miao himself found it difficult to fully straighten out the current affairs in his head. Congratulate him on his enthronement in the name of brotherhood? Or should he provide some advice?

He was still deep in thought when Cheng Guangwu spoke up from outside the room. “Shaoye, there are guests.”

“Who?” You Miao asked.

“Two officials from Yang Prefecture, one civil and one military,” Cheng Guangwu said.

“I’ll go take a look,” Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao gave a “mn” and said, “I’ll come after I finish this letter.”

Li Zhifeng left, but You Miao continued to stare at the paper, thinking hard. At last, he wrote a few lines, one of which was something from a book he’d read a few years ago that for some reason always stuck with him. It was also something Sun Yu told him: *As a ruler, one must revere the imperial heavens above, respect the ministers in the middle, and fear the common people below.*

If Zhao Chao took the throne, he'd likely be a good emperor. He was someone who knew the suffering of the world—he had commanded armies, endured hunger, suffered defeat in battle…

"What are you writing?" Zhao Chao's voice sounded in his ear.

You Miao jumped in surprise and almost toppled his ink stand.

"Why are you here?" You Miao didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "The boy servant said there were guests, but he probably didn't recognize you."

Zhao Chao snorted. "That night was too much of a whirlwind; it's fine if they didn't recognize me. Let me see what you wrote. 'As a ruler, one must revere the imperial heavens above, respect the ministers in the middle, and fear the common people below.' Okay, got it, I've received the counsel. Your yuxiong will remember it at all times."

You Miao put away the brush. He had never thought Zhao Chao would come all the way to his study. Then that meant when Li Zhifeng left just now… It clicked, and You Miao asked, "Nie-da-ge is here, too?"

The fact that Li Zhifeng didn't return after going to the main hall meant he had to be keeping Nie Dan company right now.

Zhao Chao's eyes twinkled with mirth. "Smart."

"So you're going to be crowned emperor," You Miao stated.

"Yeah," Zhao Chao said. "It's been crazy busy these days. But I don't see you being even a little bit happy for me."

"It's not like you summoned me to court," You Miao replied, amused. "With my teacher around, what place do I even have to speak?"

"I really have to thank Mister Sun," Zhao Chao said solemnly. "At first, the Yang Prefecture's gentry were going to support one of the other Zhao Clan descendants and establish him as the emperor in order to dispatch the army to the north. It was your teacher who backed me."

You Miao was stunned. “There are others in your family?”

Zhao Chao started pacing leisurely around the study and replied contemplatively, “A distant cousin, only about ten years old. About yea high.”

He gestured with his hand the height of the child.

“That won’t do,” You Miao said. “How can a child be given the role of emperor in these times?”

“Mn.” Zhao Chao nodded agreeably. “I’ll be inaugurated the third of next month.”

You Miao sighed in relief.

Zhao Chao added, “I know your teacher has plans, there’s no need for you to worry. The fact that you’re not joining the government right now is to bide your time and conserve strength. Maybe you’ll be taking over your teacher’s position in the future, and you’re just waiting for his instructions.”

“Is that what he told you?” You Miao couldn’t help but ask.

“He didn’t say anything,” Zhao Chao said. “But I figured. Right now, the ministers who fled south are all fighting; the ones who’ve come down south want war and the regional gentry of the south wants peace. Your teacher told me that at a time like this, peace is the only option.”

You Miao had to nod in agreement. With the present situation, they really had no other choice but to negotiate peace. Half of Tianqi’s army was already spent. The northern Barbarians and the Tartars were at the height of their power, which left them with no choice but to rest and recover—they had to ensure the people’s survival before they could conscript and train new forces. It would be years before they could cross the Yangtze to fight the Barbarians.

“But the Barbarians might not agree to peace,” You Miao said.

“That’s why we need to fight one more battle,” Zhao Chao replied. “And this battle will be crucial. We’ll negotiate peace after we win. But once news of the peace talks spread, Political Advisor Sun will definitely be scorned by the people.”

You Miao nodded, knowing that right now, what Sun Yu was really doing was taking on all the blame in order to help carry the burden on Zhao Chao, You Miao, and all the other young men. If he was correct in his conjecture, then after a few years of swallowing the humiliation and working hard to build a strong state, You Miao would take over Sun Yu’s mantle when Tianqi regained its strength and prosperity in Jiangnan, and would start a campaign north against the Tartars and the Barbarians.

“Circumspect and farsighted,” You Miao mumbled.

Zhao Chao laughed. “I knew you’d understand him.”

“Of course. He’s the one who taught me,” You Miao said. “So what are the ministers saying?”

“The ministers are urging to send Nie Dan north to bring back my father and brother.”

You Miao creased his brows and shook his head. “That’ll be very hard.”

Zhao Chao agreed with a “mn” again. Then he said, “Lend me some money. Yang Prefecture’s treasury is empty now. Cash is needed in too many places; I gotta be more sparing in spending this time.”

You Miao had never expected that even Zhao Chao would come asking him for money. He swiftly asked, “How much?”

“One hundred thousand silver,” Zhao Chao replied.

Such a number and right from the get-go—You Miao almost exploded, and he snapped, “Ain’t got it!”

However, Zhao Chao only grinned and sat himself down. “Xiandi, there’s only profit in this business with your yuxiong, no losses. Give me

one hundred grand and I'll split this land evenly with you!"

You Miao's face fell. "Are you even allowed to say that?!"

Zhao Chao only continued to grin at him. You Miao had known him for a long time; Zhao Chao's brow had always been locked in a deep furrow every time they met at the capital. Now that they were back in Jiangnan, he was finally relaxed, laughing and chatting—he was genuinely very happy.

"Ten thousand," You Miao countered. "No more."

"Fifty."

"Twenty."

"Thirty."

You Miao relented. "Twenty-five. I really can't give a coin more."

"Done." Zhao Chao nodded, settling the haggle.

You Miao was exasperated, and Zhao Chao joked, "They all say rare commodities are worth hoarding. You've betted on gege for so many years and it looks like you're about to win against the house, so why not go all the way?"

You Miao snapped back, "You think I'm only giving you all this because I'm trying to profit off of you?"

Zhao Chao shook his head and sighed heavily, leading You Miao out of the room with his arm around his shoulder. "Give me the money now. There are a lot of places that need funds, and I'm paying out tomorrow."

You Miao felt around his waist, and then remembered that one set of the safe's keys was with Li Zhifeng while the other was with Qiao Jue. The latter was probably in bed by now, so it wouldn't be right to rouse him. They headed straight for the main hall and saw Li Zhifeng and Nie Dan in conversation. They stopped talking when You Miao arrived and simultaneously turned their eyes on him.

“Keys,” You Miao demanded.

Li Zhifeng untied the set of keys from his belt and asked, “What wine do you want to drink?”

Nie Dan spoke up. “The moon is beautiful tonight. Why not tell the kitchen to make some small dishes, and we have drinks in the yard? We were in too much of a rush last time, and I haven’t had a chance to look at your house properly.”

Li Zhifeng nodded pleasantly. “This way, Nie-xiong.”

You Miao took Zhao Chao back to his own room and opened the safe, drawer by drawer. Inside it was the land deed, the lease contracts, money bills, and Li Zhifeng’s private ledger.

“Give me money bills this time,” Zhao Chao said.

“Duh,” You Miao said. “It’s twenty-five thousand silver; you can’t drag that back, not even in a cart.”

Zhao Chao raised the glass lamp to shine light into the chest. “Goddamn, you little bugger… You’re too rich. Fuck, I’ve never seen this much money in my life…”

You Miao pulled out the silver bills in wads of two hundred apiece, setting a whole heavy stack of one hundred bills on the table before he counted the remaining five thousand silver. But Zhao Chao coaxed and pestered You Miao until he managed to swindle another three grand from him. Feeling like he was slicing his own flesh, You Miao begrudgingly counted the money. He then pressed Zhao Chao to write a loan note—to which Zhao Chao surprisingly agreed without hesitation.

“Wait here a sec,” he said, then went out.

When he returned, he had with him a cubic seal, with which he stamped the loan receipt—marking the words “Imperial Edict of Tianqi.”

You Miao was rendered speechless, and Zhao Chao laughed.

“Thanks, xiandi. The coronation won’t be anything lavish, but there really are too many places needing cash. I gotta provide for a load of officials; everyone from the north, civil and military alike, need to eat, so I have to pay them rice and grain as salary. The treasuries from Jiangnan’s six prefectures can’t keep up with the demand anymore. I only came to borrow from you because there really is no other option.”

“Mn.” You Miao gave him a smile, knowing that this twenty-eight hundred thousand silver was genuinely helping Zhao Chao in his time of desperate need.

Zhao Chao put away the heavy, large wad of cash, and returned to the yard with You Miao to drink. The bright moon hung at the center of the sky, languidly illuminating the heavens and the earth. Nie Dan and Li Zhifeng were sitting face to face, drinking. They waved the other two over when they saw them arrive, and You Miao happily took his seat.

With drunkenness already slightly coloring his brow, Nie Dan said, “I just knew xiandi would be willing to help out.”

You Miao laughed. “Well, first I gotta be able to meet the demand. Besides, half of this money was made by Li Zhifeng.”

Li Zhifeng burst out laughing at that, unable to hold back. You Miao was stunned by the sight. Seeing his face glow with the redness of drink, he seemed to be in high spirits.

“Li-xiongdi and I chatted a little bit about military defense affairs,” Nie Dan said.

“Hm? And what about them?” You Miao looked at Nie Dan, then at Li Zhifeng. With a leg crossed, Li Zhifeng motioned for him to listen to Nie Dan.

“Next month, after His Highness is enthroned, I will have to atone for my crimes and cross the river to Jiangbei to fight the Barbarians,” Nie Dan explained.

“With how many men?” You Miao asked with a frown.

“Five thousand,” Nie Dan answered nonchalantly. “It’s enough, as long as I can drive them out from Tea Horse Road.”

You Miao knew there was not much need for him to worry if Nie Dan had confidence in something. However, Nie Dan added, “But if this battle ends in victory, I must request someone from you.”

You Miao cast a glance at Li Zhifeng, but saw he was only contemplative and drinking—You Miao knew this meant he had already mentally agreed to it. After all, this battle also involved the survival of their estate.

“If Li Zhifeng is willing, then of course I’m okay, too,” You Miao said, giving a nod.

Zhao Chao added, “When the time comes, we’ll split the army two ways. One group will cross your estate’s suspension bridge that connects the north to the south. The other will climb ashore from the harbor twelve miles out from Pei County. We’ll launch a night raid with the horses’ hooves wrapped in cloth. With a coordinated attack from both inside and out, we’re guaranteed to win with a fine victory.”

You Miao nodded. Li Zhifeng piped up, “I’m familiar with their defense formation, so I’ll be responsible for disposing of the Barbarian look-out sentry. When the time comes, we might need your help, too.”

“Not a problem,” You Miao agreed without hesitation.

He took a look at Nie Dan and Zhao Chao; maybe they had the plans already worked out prior to their coming to the estate, but at this moment, he suddenly felt really happy. They genuinely thought of him as a comrade-in-arms; no matter what they planned, they would think of what You Miao could do and include him. They were not keeping him out of things for the sake of his safety.

“Li-xiongdi will tell you the specifics of the plan,” Nie Dan said.

“Okay.” You Miao raised his cup and smiled. “I toast to Nie-da-ge. When the capital learned you had fallen, we all thought this country was

done for—”

Nie Dan stopped You Miao’s speech halfway. “As long as there’s someone like you and someone like me around, Tianqi will never fall.”

You Miao felt profoundly shaken by Nie Dan’s words. An indescribable, indelible emotion sprouted from within him.

Nie Dan took another sip of wine. “In the twelfth month last year, I was late in returning to the capital and encountered this Li-xiongdi of yours on the road. We discussed a few things, then later upon my return, I again received his help. He has inspired much in me.”

You Miao was a little surprised by the revelation. He grinned. “You two ran into each other?”

“When I was heading to Da’an to look for you,” Li Zhifeng explained.

The others nodded, and then a long silence followed. Nie Dan looked as though he wanted to speak, but after a long hesitation, nothing was said in the end.

Zhao Chao nudged him teasingly. “Nie-da-ge, why did you stop yourself? Just say it.”

You Miao was confused and looked at Li Zhifeng, then at Zhao Chao, then at Nie Dan. He realized that the three seemed to share some sort of understanding—as if there was something they wanted to tell him, but none of them were voicing it.

Did they need to borrow money again? You Miao looked at them nervously. “Do you need more money? I’ll try to think of a way…”

Money flowed out like water in times of war, You Miao was aware. And now that Riverwave Estate sat on the front lines, this battle needed to be fought, if not for himself. Mind laden with thoughts of how he might pull together another eight thousand, You Miao stood up. However, he was pushed back down to his chair by a smiling Zhao Chao.

“If you’re not going to say it, I will,” Zhao Chao threatened.

Cheeks rosy from the wine, Nie Dan slammed his cup down after a long deliberation. “You-xiandi, since you’re from a prominent family and I’m nothing but a military man, I of course daren’t claim kinship with someone of a higher status. Yet in all the years that I’ve swept across the battlefields, I, Nie Dan, have rarely ran into anyone I found congenial. In those days back at the capital, I received your wholehearted assistance, and I of course felt your great kindness. Li-xiongdi might be a Quanrong, but the way he conducts himself and the way he handles matters is full of hot blood. He is both sentimental and righteous, practically a marvel.”

You Miao gaped, speechless.

Zhao Chao doubled over laughing, bending so low he was going to tumble under the table. Even Li Zhifeng couldn’t resist grinning. You Miao listened to Nie Dan go on and on, but still couldn’t make heads of tails of what he was trying to get at. He understood the “claim kinship of a higher status” part, though. Did Nie Dan want to form a marriage alliance with the You family? That couldn’t be; it wouldn’t be You Miao he needed to talk to about that, and it was too sudden. Not to mention You Miao hadn’t visited any of his cousins since his return, so he had no clue at all who might’ve caught Nie Dan’s eye.

“Nie-da-ge wants me to…matchmake?” You Miao ventured.

His tentative question had Zhao Chao and Li Zhifeng burst out laughing at the same time. Li Zhifeng’s laugh was crisp and clear, and in all these years, it was You Miao’s first time seeing him laugh this happily.

“If you and His Highness do not scorn me, then today, let’s…” Nie Dan finally arrived at the most critical part of his speech. “Da-ge wants to swear brotherhood with all of you. And in the future, we will…we will share the good and the bad, the honor and the shame. Let us bleed and sweat for Tianqi and recover our land. What does xiandi think of the idea?”

You Miao was once again stunned silent.

With all eyes staring at him, You Miao burst out joyously, “Of *course* I’d be happy to! And it’d be *me* who’s claiming kinship of a higher status! But Your Highness, you…”

“Just think of me as that abject Third Prince from the capital while you still can, before I ascend the throne,” Zhao Chao said with a chuckle. “What, you don’t wanna do it?”

“I do, I do!”

You Miao was so thrilled he could hardly speak. When his eyes fell on Li Zhifeng, he saw something deeper in his gaze. Understanding dawned on him. Although Li Zhifeng was technically free of the slave status, his identity was still that of You Miao’s butler. But once they became sworn brothers with Nie Dan and Zhao Chao, they would truly be equals.

Moreover, there would be no issue regarding who was claiming the kinship of a higher status when it came to Li Zhifeng, a Quanrong Prince, swearing brotherhood with Nie Dan, a nation-protecting grand general. It was only in this moment that You Miao truly understood that Nie Dan was aware of Li Zhifeng’s love, which also meant that this move was to help Li Zhifeng out.

Zhao Chao said, smiling, “Li Zhifeng is still a Quanrong at the end of the day. The various branches of Quanrong have been scattered for a long time. This way, in the future when we’ve recovered the land north of the river, we’ll have a reason to lend armies to Li-xiong. We’ll be supporting his return to regain his country.”

You Miao nodded. “I’ll go retrieve the incense. Let’s do our vows here tonight, and the moon shall be our witness. How’s that?”

Nie Dan agreed enthusiastically, so You Miao brought out the incense. There in Shen Garden, the four prostrated eight times toward the sky and completed their vows to be brothers. Nie Dan was the oldest among them, so he was naturally da-ge. Li Zhifeng was thus the second, Zhao Chao the third, and You Miao the youngest. They swore to join in life and share in death. As he was not someone who enjoyed fancy words that spoke

of equal wealth and suffering, Nie Dan only asked that they exert themselves for the nation and give it their all to the very end.

Since Zhao Chao would soon take the throne, brotherly addresses would of course only be used in private. You Miao noticed that while Li Zhifeng rarely spoke, his brow carried a smile throughout the evening, which meant he was actually very happy deep down. With this new bond, the relationship between him and Li Zhifeng might have shifted a little again, and You Miao couldn't help but sigh with amazement.

After the vow, the four drank in Shen Garden's yard until they were completely wasted. You Miao couldn't hold his liquor well, so he was the first to go down. But even after he had passed out, Li Zhifeng and Nie Dan were still conversing on and off.

It was in Li Zhifeng's arms that You Miao woke the next morning, and he found he had returned to his own room. He reached out and brushed Li Zhifeng's face, who in turn rubbed his forehead and rose to prepare breakfast.

"Where's Nie-da-ge?" You Miao asked.

"Left at daybreak," Li Zhifeng replied. "He told me to go accept my military role in three days."

You Miao nodded.

Three days later, the government of Yang Prefecture had settled the matter of the imperial capital's relocation—it would be established in the city of Maocheng, north of Yang Prefectural City. An imperial villa existed in Maocheng from the previous dynasty; it was a place where the royals had stayed to escape the heat when they visited Jiangnan. The Ministry of Public Works took on the renovation project to construct this palace as the new imperial city. The new capital city couldn't match the old one in the north, but at the very least, the officials now had a place to live.

You Miao went with Li Zhifeng to Maocheng, and this time, it was purely to accompany him to assume his post. He himself wasn't going to enter the government just yet, so he tried to avoid coming face to face with

the hundreds of civil and military officials. However, the Ministry of Personnel was going through its busy period, and its office was jam-packed with people who had come to collect their assignment papers, waiting for the officials inside to call their names.

"Here to take on your post?" the administrator of the Ministry of Personnel said. "Wait outside."

With a single look, You Miao could tell this administrator was new; the building of the new reign wasn't short of landed gentry in Yang Prefecture who "donated" in return for a government position. New faces like this one were nine times out of ten sent in by the locals.

"Go find your minister and tell him to come out to meet me," You Miao spoke up.

"Insolence!" the administrator exclaimed. "You think I won't get you thrown out?"

You Miao chuckled. "Try if you dare. I'm the biggest creditor of the six ministries. From the emperor above to the leaders of the six ministries—they *all* owe me money. Tell Lin Luoyang to come out."

Someone on the side saw You Miao and exclaimed, "Lord You!"

Plenty of officials had come from the north, and none dared to act out when they saw You Miao. The announcement of his arrival was swiftly delivered, and it didn't take long before Lin Luoyang came out, wiping away his sweat. He smacked the administrator aside. The gentry waiting outside for their post assignment watched this scene unfold, and terrified that You Miao was going to cause trouble for the Ministry of Personnel, Lin Luoyang did his best to persuade You Miao to enter the office.

"The Letter of Appointment is already drafted." Lin Luoyang pressed his seal over a document, then handed it to Li Zhifeng. "Use this letter to collect the commander's seal and the military tally. [9] Li-xiong will be taking over the command of the Pacification Control Commission. You are granted the title General Yamen, [10] fifth rank."

"General Yamen doesn't sound good, [11]." You Miao complained. "Change it, change it."

Woeful, Lin Luoyang said, "How could I? It's already done."

"Just cross it off on the document," You Miao said with a grin. "Bring me a brush, I'll do it…"

Lin Luoyang was going to go crazy; was that *okay* ? But You Miao knew Zhao Chao couldn't care less about petty things like this. What should he change the title to, though? Li Zhifeng's tribe worshiped the Canine God, but there was no way he was changing the title to "General Dog God" because that would just make Li Zhifeng a guard dog. Thus, with a sweep of his brush, he changed Li Zhifeng's title to "General Huwei"—the "Majesty of the Tiger." Now *that* sounded impressive.

He turned to Lin Luoyang again. "I've an older brother at home who's currently looking to get an errand position. Is there anywhere I could stuff another person?"

Lin Luoyang understood in an instant. "Has he studied before?" he asked. "The list of names for the Ministry of Personnel was drafted entirely by your teacher, so it wouldn't be easy—not to mention obvious—if you tried to squeeze someone in. But if he's a scholar, we can talk…"

"Nope, that won't work," You Miao said. "Are there any more spots left in the Ministry of Revenue?"

Lin Luoyang retrieved a list of names. "The Ministry of Revenue has been completely divvied up by Yang Prefecture's House of Tang, Liao, and Xie. Your House of You has also donated for a few positions."

"Nice," You Miao said, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. "And how much money was collected from all this?"

Lin Luoyang replied helplessly, "You'll have to ask your teacher."

Never had You Miao thought that even Sun Yu would do something like this.

“Raising soldiers, training, acquiring horses…these things all cost money,” Lin Luoyang said. “There’s also the matter of settling civilians who fled south. Money is flowing out like water. Your teacher is a badass; this way, everything is taken care of.”

You Miao nodded slowly in understanding. “Why is the Master of the Books [12] position still vacant in the Administration Chamber?”

Lin Luoyang met You Miao’s eyes. “Why do you think?”

You Miao immediately got it—this job was probably left for him. Sun Yu was the Political Advisor in charge of key political matters for the entire country; You Miao reckoned that it wouldn’t be long before he urged him to enter the government as well.

“Then he can’t be assigned to the Administration Chamber.”

You Miao had initially wanted to send his brother there so that he could send word if there was wind of anything. Then again, there was also the Ministry of Revenue.

After a long consideration, Lin Luoyang said, “How about Granary Inspector? Sixth rank. It’s not a high position, but a lucrative job; he could control the husk spoilage.”

“Done. That’s settled, then.”

You Miao patted Lin Luoyang on the shoulder, knowing that the job he just offered You Hange was genuinely a good assignment. Granary Inspectors managed grain taxation from rural villages. However, there was a discrepancy between what the people paid after weighing the grain and what was actually collected. After all, the de-husking process wasn’t always perfect in removing the husk entirely, and this value difference was called “husk spoilage.” The previous reign had dictated that ten grams to a tael would be the acceptable minimal spoilage, and once the inspectors collected the grain, they could decide the husk spoilage according to the amount collected for the season and what was actually yielded to the government. There was some value to be skimmed off in this in-and-out, which was what made this job lucrative.

“I’ll draft the assignment papers while you’re here,” Lin Luoyang said. “What’s the name?”

“You Hange.” You Miao hummed for a moment, then said, “Originally a citizen of Liu Prefecture. Write that for now. I’ll tell him to bring his resume tomorrow and hand it to the Ministry of Personnel to keep for records.”

“Fine. Just make sure you don’t forget it,” Lin Luoyang said. “The salary is based on the sixth rank…”

You Miao nodded. He had taken care of You Hange’s affairs in a matter of words and bade farewell to go to the Ministry of War with Li Zhifeng to collect the commander’s seal. There was still a large crowd of people lined up outside the office when they emerged, and they were all stretching their necks in an attempt to catch a glimpse of You Miao—the guy who went through the back door.

The Ministry of War was no less noisy and crowded, and the men were there to enlist in the army. Unlike civil servants who were calm and collected, soldiers pushed and shoved and were on the verge of throwing punches. You Miao tried to squeeze through the horde, but almost fell when he was shoved away.

“ *What’re you doing* ?!”

Li Zhifeng picked up two officers and threw them out of the office. Now the entire great hall of the Ministry of War exploded and everyone was pushing in to start a brawl. It was utter mayhem.

“Don’t fight!” You Miao yelled at the top of his lungs.

Ping Xi emerged after hearing the commotion, and yelled, “What’s going on? Mind yourselves! You…You Ziqian? What are you doing here?”

You Miao tilted his head toward Li Zhifeng, and Ping Xi immediately understood. The thuggish soldiers outside the hall were going to start acting up again.

“You told us to come collect our assignments, and we’ve been waiting for two days now!” someone shouted.

“Your superior isn’t here, what’s the point in whining?” Ping Xi snapped back.

Things were starting to get rowdy again outside, so much so that it was giving You Miao a headache. Ping Xi had just joined the new Ministry of War and was unfamiliar to both the place and faces, which was why none of the commanding officers took him seriously.

“Bring me the registry and go back to your thing,” You Miao thus said.

Ping Xi went back inside and someone retrieved the registry for You Miao. He had worked as an Army Censor for a good half a year previously, so he knew what to do. Right then and there, he pulled a table over and set up right inside the Ministry of War’s reception hall.

“Everyone, come. Each of you will take a note slip from me and go find the Vice Minister to collect your work badges.

One by one, You Miao wrote the slips. When he saw those under Li Zhifeng’s command, he’d tell them, “Just follow him. He’s your superior.”

With this, both of the captains shut up. One of them was the thuggish soldier Li Zhifeng had thrown out earlier as a show of strength, and Li Zhifeng turned to him.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Wu Yong,” the thuggish captain answered.

“I’m Huang An,” the other one said.

Li Zhifeng nodded. He handed them his commander’s seal and had them go to the Ministry of Revenue to register their salary. Meanwhile, You Miao worked at his desk and finished running through the entire registry for Ping Xi in an afternoon, just in time for the two captains to return.

“Go to the units stationed at the west side of the city. Pass down the order that they are to follow me. We will build camp north of Riverwave Estate,” Li Zhifeng instructed.

You Miao and Li Zhifeng went separate ways; You Miao made another stop at the shops before he went to the outskirts of the city to wait for Li Zhifeng. Soon, Li Zhifeng came with a marching horde of two thousand men in what appeared to be a rather impressive formation. As he rocked back and forth on Li Zhifeng’s horse, You Miao kept stealing looks behind.

“What?” Li Zhifeng asked.

You Miao said with a grin, “You’re a commander now.”

Li Zhifeng smiled, but didn’t respond, and the two followed the south road to return to the estate. The suspension bridge had opened a new path, and the soldiers crossed it in an orderly manner, arriving at the estate’s north shore. As You Miao watched the army, his eyes swept across the riverbanks from the north shore. The green hills and blue waters engulfed him with dauntless passion.

A new age was dawning.

[Arc 3 End]

Arc 4: Shorthand Tablature of Magnolia Blossoms

《减字木兰花》：宋：朱敦儒

刘郎已老，不管桃花依旧笑。

要听琵琶，重院莺啼觅谢家。

曲终人醉，多似浔阳江上泪。

万里东风，国破山河落照红。

Shorthand Tablature of Magnolia Blossoms
Zhu Dunru (A.D. 1081-1159) Song Dynasty

Liu has become old, unmoved is he by the peach blossoms' unchanged smile.

In search of pipa tune, I cross into the depths of the inner courtyard for a songstress.

At song's finale, I am intoxicated. My tears cascade, just as upon Xunyang River.

Ten miles of easterly winds; the broken country is reflected in the red of the sunsetting sun.

[Chapter 40]

April in Yang Prefecture was a time of fair weather as willow catkins fluttered in the breeze.

After You Miao returned to Riverwave Estate, the first task on his list was to tell You Hange to draft a calling card and report to the Ministry of Revenue. Then, he took over the administrative work for the Military Defense Department. Ping Xi didn't dare to give You Miao the title Army Censor, but none of the civil officials claimed the position, either, so he figured everyone knew what was up.

There was no idling for You Miao—he had to help Li Zhifeng manage the army on one hand and reorganize the estate's affairs on the other. As adept as Qiao Jue was at doing business, he was not so when it came to managing estates. In the year You Miao had gone to the capital, Qiao Jue could only break even.

The first order of business was to turn all the working fields into grain-growing paddy fields. You Miao could almost see it: the food produced in the Jiangnan region would now have to feed at least three times the population.

This number consisted of refugees who had fled south from the north, the new regiments, as well as the necessary resources for southern trade. When the north fell to enemy occupation and the warfront moved to the south, many tenant farmers who were scared of death had run away. You Miao remeasured the estate's land, and then hired nearly a thousand new tenants from Yang Prefectural City. At the same time, he took advantage of this opportunity to claim all the government land in the area surrounding Riverwave Estate, increasing the total sum of land he owned to thirty-four thousand acres. This way, the vast piece of land south of Guozhuang now belonged to Riverwave Estate.

In the past, claiming such an enormous amount of land in Yang Prefecture would be as hard as ascending the heavens. But now that the emperor was You Miao's own sworn brother, grabbing however much wasteland he wanted was just a matter of asking for it.

Be that as it may, You Miao didn't dare go overboard. He knew deep down that he was taking advantage of a Ministry of War loophole. He gave Li Zhifeng a proposal to submit to the ministry, claiming that since the east-to-west border of Riverwave Estate would be used as the battleground to fight the Barbarians, more land needed to be claimed in order to make up for the damage. Ping Xi approved this proposal and then passed it to Qin Shaonan from the Ministry of Revenue, who also stamped it. As a result, all that wasteland fell under You Miao's control.

The agreement was that once the battle was over, the land would be redrawn, and half of it would go to Riverwave Estate while the other half would go to Li Zhifeng's command. When time came for the Ministry of Revenue to retake control, You Miao would tell Qin Shaonan to change out the agreement—with a sweep of his brush, the land in its entirety would belong to You Miao.

You Miao and Li Zhifeng spent two days riding across the fields to inspect the land, including the hilly areas. All this land was originally Yang Prefecture government's reserve. Some of the pluckier northerners who'd fled south had reclaimed the open land and tried to farm it; a smattering of them were tilling the fields here and there, and when they looked up to see You Miao, they couldn't help but feel antsy. Knowing they couldn't be driven out, You Miao simply read them the government's decree, informing them that the fields were now under his management. They could continue to farm provided they paid the forty percent rent.

Li Zhifeng stopped the horse at the border. Ahead of them were vast, undulating hills.

"We can plant more tea," Li Zhifeng suggested.

You Miao shook his head. "There's not enough rice to eat; we can't plant tea. We'll have to build terraced fields on the slopes and grow grain."

Li Zhifeng answered with a "mn." He never had any real opinions when it came to agricultural work, and simply went with whatever You Miao said. When they went back, You Miao amended the lease and divided the fields into three tiers: top, middle, lower. The tenant farmers who had

been with the estate since before the war broke out and had stuck around would pay the same rent as always.

When news of the Barbarian's invasion southward had come, almost sixty percent of the tenants ran away, leaving a great number of paddy fields behind. You Miao shredded their lease agreements and made new adjustments.

As for the new tenants, You Miao gave them two options after distributing the farming tools: those who chose to remain within the current established estate grounds to work the top-tier fields had to pay seventy percent rent, those who would farm new, unclaimed fields would pay sixty percent, and those who would cultivate the hills and build terraced fields would only pay fifty percent. The lease would last for three years, at the end of which the rent increase would be individually evaluated. The estate would provide the seeds.

It took nearly two whole weeks to measure the fields and recruit new tenants. Once that was settled, You Miao brought on two managers from Yang Prefectural City to handle the sundry matters of the new manors. Money was being spent like flowing water; You Miao needed to feed and support the tenants who were reclaiming land, while simultaneously constructing new manors in the northwest and northeast. He was practically being worked into the ground.

Li Zhifeng, meanwhile, spent most of the day outside training his units nonstop. Occasionally, he'd even have to eat and spend the nights with the soldiers in order to familiarize them with night combat. During those days, You Miao would bury himself in work, managing various affairs.

This morning, You Miao rose fairly early. After breakfast, he wrote and drew inside the study.

Changyuan entered, bowed, and announced, "Shaoye, guests have come."

You Miao was a little surprised. "Who?"

“Four people have come, claiming to be shaoye’s cousins from Liu Prefecture…”

This was a huge deal, and You Miao exclaimed as he rushed out, “Invite them for tea in the hall this instant. Tell them I’ll be right there!”

The You family had been entrenched in Jiangnan for many years, becoming a dominant power that could not be ignored. Although not many from the family worked for the government, the clan was on the rise to becoming the wealthiest in the region. The family was further divided into two major branches: one in Liu Prefecture and the other in Yang Prefecture. You Miao had always had a good relationship with the cousins from Liu Prefecture, so he was quite delighted by the news of their visit. He quickly emerged to welcome them.

Qiao Jue was merrily taking care of the four guests when You Miao entered the main hall, and at the sight of him, they all stood up.

“What brings you all here?” You Miao said with a smile, cupping his hands in greeting.

“We’re here to sponge off of you. Us uncles can barely make it in Yang Prefecture now,” joked one of the uncles. His name was You Deming, and he was the youngest among the uncles, close to Qiao Jue’s age, and usually hung out with the juniors.

You Miao doubled over with laughter as he went to brew tea for them.

“I saw you guys on the streets doing business a few days ago,” Qiao Jue said with a chuckle. “You looked like you’re doing just fine?”

Someone else sighed. It was You Miao’s older cousin, named You Shu. He wasn’t usually one who joked around, and was the most mature of the juniors. He didn’t speak, and simply shook his head before he took a sip of tea.

You Deming explained, “I’ll be honest with you, Miao-zi and Qiao-xiong. The whole family moved to Yang Prefecture from Liu Prefecture at

the end of last year. We had planned on going back, so we didn't really want to bother you. But by the looks of things now, it doesn't seem like Jiangbei will be reclaimed any time soon. They're all talking about the enthronement of the new emperor; who knows what the prospects will be in the future, so we're here to ask if there's any jobs in the new government…"

"I haven't even taken up a position yet." You Miao laughed. "What do you think?"

That was true, the group realized. There had been all sorts of rumors flying about recently, saying they were going to fight and recover land in one second and then saying they were settling in Jiangnan in the next. There was no sure word.

You Shu cut in a moment later. "I hear war is coming? Will Liu Prefecture be recovered?"

You Miao knew about Nie Dan's military plans, but at most, the upcoming battle would only have them recover Pei County. It was hard to say even for Sunshower Tea Estate, never mind the vast lands of Liu and Su Prefectures.

"I'm afraid that'll be difficult to accomplish in the next few years," You Miao replied.

The relatives gave a slow nod.

An idea struck You Miao, and thinking they had come at the right time, he asked, "Geges, what are you doing to make a living in Yang Prefecture?"

"What living?" You Deming laughed. "The second house, third house, sixth house, and twelfth house put together some money and bought two government positions at the Ministry of Public Works. You remember your sixth uncle's son? The one named You Fa. And your third uncle's son, You Xi…"

"Yes, I remember them," You Miao said.

The gears in his head turned nonstop; he recalled that the Ministry of Public Work's Wasteland Reclamation Division seemed to have an official by the name of Ji Guang, and he was one of the captives the Tartars had taken to the north. You Miao even shielded him once.

"What about the Yang Prefecture side of the family?" You Miao asked.

"Great gramps over there wasn't affected much," You Shu replied. "The seven juniors from that branch have all entered the Ministries of Revenue and Justice."

"Mn." You Miao nodded.

"You're the Tanhua. Why didn't you enter the government?" You Shu questioned. "I hear you shared a friendship with His Highness the Third Prince while you were at the capital, so why is he letting you hang around the estate however you want?"

"It's not the right time yet," You Miao answered with a smile. Then he said, "Geges, something's come to mind, but I don't know if you're willing to join me?"

He proceeded to give them a brief account of estate matters, telling them about how there was no one managing the land by the northwest shore even though he had already claimed it.

The group exchanged a look, and You Deming spoke up. "Sure, why not? Helping you manage the estate is more than we can ask for. It's just…"

Knowing he was concerned about the Barbarians potentially crossing the river, You Miao assured them, "Don't worry, I'm constantly attending to the security of the estate. The government is currently raising a regiment of a thousand men for me. I've also got over two hundred private estate guards."

You Shu wasn't one to jump to an agreement, however. He deliberated briefly before he said, "We'll have to discuss this when we get

back. If it works out, then it probably won't just be our houses that'd move in. I'm afraid the things that'd inevitably come afterward will have to trouble you."

"Please." You Miao chuckled. "It'd be *me* troubling you guys."

You Shu nodded. Lunch was served after tea, and when it came time for them to leave, You Miao assembled a cart full of rapeseed greens and honey from the estate for them to bring back. Once they were gone, he immediately rode northwestward to find Li Zhifeng for some brainstorming.

Changyuan was initially going to send someone to go along, but You Miao dismissed the boy servant and only brought with him something to eat before he headed straight for where the troops were training. When he arrived at the grounds northwest of the estate, however, there was no one around the secluded, quiet valley. Probing around, You Miao went deeper and deeper into the woods.

Although the hill wasn't high, it had garnered a unique name: Quan Mountain—Spring Mountain—and it echoed Yao Lake—the Lake of Fine Jade—in Riverwave Estate. The hills were all terraced fields waiting to be cultivated, with field markers already implanted. Up on higher ground was a small stream formed by the spring water flowing down the hill.

In ancient times, this place used to be a tea plantation as well, grown by a wealthy merchant named Bai. But Jiangnan had suffered a great three-year drought that dried out the tea trees of the entire region that were not near a water source, including those in this area. Unable to recover from this massive loss, the merchant Bai took his whole family to move overseas. When no one from the Bai family returned to manage the land after twenty years, Yang Prefecture's government reclaimed it as their land. Cultivating fields on top of hills was not an easy task, so no one tried to acquire the property. This was why the land along the border of Riverwave Estate was simply left in its barren state.

Gradually, the spring water of the tea hills returned. The locals often said there were deities residing on the hill, and that Bai did not please

the Quan Mountain God, which was why the water stopped during the drought years. This had led to the fabrication of innumerable love stories that were beautiful yet tragic.

Cultivating terraced fields was You Miao's plan when he first claimed this land, but if he ran into drought, he would have to think of a way to transport water up the hill. He once saw a type of keel waterwheel in *"Mohist Classics"* that drew water from the bottom of terraced hills and transported it upward, one level at a time. It wouldn't be a bad thing to look into after the war was over.

He stopped the horse In front of the valley and looked around. It was quiet, without a single human around. Wondering where everyone had gone, he dismounted and slowly walked forward. Did Li Zhifeng take the troops out?

Thrash!

The linked ropes on the sides of the road swept up, startling You Miao. A lasso then came flying at him, from which he subconsciously withdrew. And then there was another. Without any weapons in hand, You Miao had to dodge left and right. Two more ropes shot simultaneously toward him, one on his left and one on his right, leaving him no room to escape. Thus, You Miao steadied himself and charged forward, dodging three sling ropes that came flying at him with a fine leap.

Sharp, whistling winds shot past him when he landed, which startled him even more. Without looking back, he bolted for about ten steps before dropping to the ground to tumble. He hadn't realized the valley was so full of traps?!

"Nice!"

After You Miao dodged the last net, cheers erupted from all around him.

Landing sideways, You Miao bent down to inspect his surroundings. It was then that the several generals of the Yang Prefectural Army showed themselves from behind the trees.

Li Zhifeng flashed a smile and extended a hand. With no other choice, the two lieutenant generals had to slap some money onto his palm. As soon as You Miao saw this exchange, he doubled over laughing, pointing at Li Zhifeng.

"You were *betting* on me?" Exasperated, You Miao snatched the money and stuffed it in his own breast pocket.

Li Zhifeng glanced at You Miao and said, "Didn't I have to hand the money over to higher authorities in the end anyway?"

You Miao laughed, horribly amused, and followed Li Zhifeng up the hill to inspect the terrain. This area was the other side of the Yangtze bank, the shores and riverside bluffs of which were even more perilous than those of Riverwave Estate. On the other shore was the other half of Quan Mountain. Past the bluffs and another hill over was Pei County City.

The two shores separated by a natural moat gave off a certain feeling: " *The apes wailed as the wind rushed through the high sky.* [13] " The army camp of two hundred tents was at the foot of the hill on their side of the bank. Sitting on a rock, Li Zhifeng chipped away at a bamboo culm with a small dagger.

You Miao scanned the landscape. The cliff walls of the opposite shore were smooth enough that not even monkeys could climb them, though there was a single tilted pine on the facade. This natural rampart was called the Wall of Yearning; if a suspension bridge could be built to connect the shores here and they managed to sneak across to Jiangbei without anyone's notice, it'd make for an excellent opportunity for a raid.

"What are you making?" You Miao asked, turning his head.

"Nothing," Li Zhifeng replied. "Just a flute."

You Miao stared at the flute body, then moments later, a daring idea sprouted in his mind.

"I've an idea that we can try…" You Miao said.

Raising his brows, Li Zhifeng looked up.

At dusk the next day, You Miao brought a rope with a grappling hook tied at the end and placed it in Li Zhifeng's hand. Li Zhifeng thought for a moment, then pulled his longbow to a perfect full moon arch and let loose an arrow. It bounced off of the opposite cliff wall and caught on the pine tree.

"Nice!" You Miao praised. "Just like that! One more time!"

Li Zhifeng shot again and the arrow whizzed out like a shooting star. It was caught by a breeze in midair and hooked onto the pine tree. You Miao immediately tugged the rope back, gripping it firmly. He tested the give, then attached another hook onto the rope.

Li Zhifeng took the hook, but You Miao insisted, "I'll go."

Li Zhifeng's face fell, and he exclaimed, "No! It's too dangerous!"

"I'm lighter than you," You Miao reasoned seriously. "Does it really matter whether it's you or me going?"

Li Zhifeng stared at You Miao, wanting to say more, but You Miao pecked him on the lips. "Don't worry, it'll be all right."

"Hook another rope. If anything goes wrong, I'll withdraw the rope from this end," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao gave a "mn" and removed his full-body leather armor, then unfastened his sword from his waist and tossed it to the side. Feet bare and dressed only in his inner robe, an additional thick rope was tethered around his waist. He locked the iron pulley attached to the grappling hook firmly onto the rope, and then, gripping the hook tightly, he pushed off the rock with both feet and glided into the air as if he was flying.

Rope in hand, Li Zhifeng let it drop slightly to reduce You Miao's gliding speed. The pine tree across rustled as it shuddered, and a whole nest of birds flew out.

As winds whipped around him, You Miao's heart pounded in his chest. This plan was honestly too risky, but luckily Li Zhifeng hadn't quite processed what had happened just yet. When he came around and realized what exactly had went down, he would definitely be stressed after the fact.

You Miao came to a stop at halfway, then shimmied bit by bit toward the opposite shore by rocking back and forth while Li Zhifeng tied the other end of the rope around his own waist and walked slowly up toward higher ground. The pair worked together to get You Miao across to the opposite bluff. When he finally made it, he steadied himself and jumped off, the rope quivering when he landed.

The terrain leveled out a lot more past the cliff wall, and there was a clearing at the peak of the hill with a disused zigzagging descending path that was overgrown with weeds. You Miao poked his head out to look down, but the rope around his waist stirred.

"I'm fine—!" You Miao called across the river, then retied the rope around his waist to a big, sky-reaching tree. Moments later, Li Zhifeng also glided over. He seized You Miao's waist, hugging him tightly from behind while carefully scanning downward.

Pei County City's lights were visible against the dark of the night.

You Miao could feel Li Zhifeng's heart race—he reckoned he was now scared after the fact.

"We'll go back first and put together a plan," Li Zhifeng said. "Tomorrow, I'll go to Yang Prefectural City to perfect it with da-ge before we launch the raid."

The battle was now a sure win. The next day, Li Zhifeng hurried to Yang Prefectural City while You Miao stayed in the estate. He called over several boy servants for assistance, and together, they crafted new weapons.

The iron-wheeled hook was something he saw in *"Mohist Classics,"* but the blow pipe was a toy the people of Yang Prefecture loved playing with when he was young. You Miao made more and more pipes,

producing over a thousand of them from bamboo culms with plans to fill them with needles coated in deadly green tree viper venom.

During spring, green tree vipers appeared in great numbers in the north part of the estate. After the Barbarians had set fire to the hills, innumerable snakes were driven out of the woods. Qiao Jue had hired snake controllers to exterminate them, and their galls were subsequently dug out to brew wine. The venom was collected and stored, and as luck would have it, You Miao had a use for it now.

Each bamboo pipe would contain one needle, and could only be used once. But once was all You Miao needed.

Three days later, Li Zhifeng and Nie Dan finalized the plan, and You Miao followed them to the battlefield. At dusk on the seventeenth of the fifth month, Li Yan proceeded to knock on the city gate for the negotiation talks. He was protected by an escort troop dispatched by Sun Yu, and they stopped at Tea Horse Road. A messenger came out and delivered word, allowing Li Yan to enter the city the next day.

That night, twelve hundred soldiers scaled Quan Mountain and glided across to the bluffs of the opposite shore in the midst of twilight. Each with a grappling hook, they soundlessly occupied the cliffs and slid down the side bordering Pei County City and infiltrated it.

When You Miao landed and looked around, he realized this was no longer the Pei County City he knew. The side facing the hills had bodies piled as high as a mountain, which emitted a foul stench. He'd landed right next to it.

More and more soldiers came down, and they crept into the city beneath the moonlight under Li Zhifeng's lead. The entire city was on curfew, and there were Xianbei soldiers patrolling on horseback. Tianqi soldiers shot venomous needles from both sides of the road, and instantly, the Xianbei soldiers fell off their steeds without so much as a grunt.

The Tianqi soldiers stole the horses and changed into Xianbei armor.

As Li Zhifeng directed his horse to change course, You Miao called in a low voice, “Come with me!”

He was more than familiar with the area, and the band hurried toward the Pei County government office. They were stopped when they arrived at the office’s entrance, but Li Zhifeng yelled something in the Xianbei tongue and a guard approached with a lit torch.

“Shoot!” You Miao hissed.

Another venomous needle shot out and robbed that guard’s life.

Brandishing his sword, You Miao yelled, “Charge!”

Twelve hundred Tianqi soldiers silently stormed the county government office, cutting down Xianbei soldiers who rushed out as they charged all the way to the inner courtyard. Li Zhifeng kicked down the doors and shot venomous needles without looking, and every man who was beyond the doors fell before they could make it out.

You Miao searched each and every one of the rooms, kicking the doors open as he went, and the subordinates would swarm after him. When they came to a large room in the east wing, they heard a sharp scream of a woman. You Miao instantly halted.

“Stop!” he ordered.

A Xianbei general shoved a nude woman aside and lunged ferociously at You Miao, but he was overpowered and subdued by You Miao’s swarming subordinates. He roared angrily, but You Miao did not understand a single word he said.

“Tie him up!” You Miao ordered before he rushed into the room toward the woman. “Are you a Han?” he asked her.

The woman quickly dressed herself. Unable to see clearly in the dark, You Miao raised the torch. Seeing that she was indeed a Han, he asked, “Where’s the tally?”

“F…follow me!”

The woman led You Miao and party to the study. After finding the military tally, You Miao charged back into the great hall. By then, the fight was already over, and every man inside the county government office had been killed.

Li Zhifeng emerged like a whirlwind and shook his head, but You Miao flashed the command tally in his hand.

“Let’s go open the city gates! Come!” he cried.

The Xianbei army’s main camp was stationed on the outskirts of the city in the direction of Tea Horse Road. In the dark of the night, a troop of soldiers dressed in Xianbei army uniforms rushed toward the city gates. Once they got there, they were met with a loud inquiry shouted from the city wall.

Li Zhifeng answered using the Xianbei tongue and flashed the command tally in his hand. The city guard quickly came down to inspect it. Another venomous needle was shot, and soon after, the Tianqi army overtook and opened the city gates.

You Miao’s heart was racing so hard it was going to jump out of his throat. At last, Li Zhifeng poked his head out from atop the city walls, pulled his bow, and shot an arrow into the sky.

The sharp sound of the whistling arrow ripped through the night, flying into the far distance and raising the curtains of battle.

At the city gates, over a thousand soldiers raised their bows, and the firelit arrows howled like a meteor shower as they rained toward the main Xianbei army camp!

Over at Tea Horse Road in the distance, Nie Dan was at the ready, wielding a long spear. “ *Charge* —!” he roared.

Five thousand Tianqi cavalry, horse hooves wrapped in cloth, left Tea Horse Road and charged toward the main Xianbei army camp!

As soon as the fires started, they spread with the southeasterly winds—in the direction of the Xianbei camp. It was absolute chaos on the outskirts of Pei County City; the fires were setting the entire night sky alight as wave after wave of arrows rained down. The defense commanders never imagined that such a turn of events would occur in their own city. A squad braved the arrows in an attempt to rush the city, but before the messenger even reached the gates, they were shot dead by a mess of arrows.

Meanwhile, Nie Dan's great army had already charged past the plains and were rushing toward the Xianbei army camp—they were mere hundreds of feet away before the Xianbei noticed that the premier God of War of the northwest had arrived. The entire camp fell apart in a fraction of a second. When You Miao ran up the city tower, he saw that the sea of fire had reached the gates and continued to blaze toward the other two main Xianbei camps.

"They've lost." You Miao could tell at a single glance. "Guard the city gates," he ordered, and rushed back down.

"Where are you going? I'll follow you," Li Zhifeng called after him.

"To find the money!" You Miao replied. "Keep a good watch. If any government officials come and try to take over, send someone to tell me!"

"Be careful!" Li Zhifeng shouted.

You Miao took fifty men with him and crossed the dark Pei County City to return to the government office. Every civilian in the city was pretty much awake by now, but their doors and windows were all firmly locked; they were too afraid to set foot outside. Once inside the office, You Miao gave another command, sending riders to spread word on the streets. He then called over a soldier.

"Have you found the treasury?" You Miao demanded.

The soldier nodded. "It's located right behind the office."

“Take me there,” You Miao ordered.

The soldier was going to break the lock on the doors with a kick, but You Miao waved to stop him. He went and found the keys on a dead Xianbei general and opened the lock. Inside the treasury was an entire chamber of gold and silver—the Xianbei had scoured all of Liu Prefecture and stored their ill-gotten gains here.

“Call over ten men. Don’t make it public, and count everything,” You Miao instructed.

Holding up a torch, You Miao surveyed the storeroom full of shimmering gold and silver. After everything was tallied, there was a total of one hundred and twenty thousand taels of silver, eight thousand taels of gold, and three hundred thousand copper coins. Although this appeared to be a massive sum, Liu Prefecture was nonetheless a prefecture of wealthy commoners; the majority of wealth had been taken by the major houses when they made their escape. Plenty of money had also been transported back north by the Xianbei.

The battle outside was fervent, and a soldier came to report.

“Report—! The Xianbei are running away! General Huwei and General Nie have joined together, and they are now fighting off the remaining forces! Ten thousand men of the main army have entered the city; will Lord You please give further orders!”

“Have them spread out in the city,” You Miao instructed. “Exterminate the Xianbei, capture all foreigners on sight and lock them up in the city’s west end! All of you, hurry, pack the gold and silver into the chests… No, pack the gold first, then the silver, the coins last… Hurry, hurry, hurry!”

While the soldiers rushed to pack the money, they also discovered some antiques. The process took a full hour. When roosters began to crow outside, You Miao stopped the soldiers in their work—judging by the time, Nie Dan should be entering the city very soon. As he left, he locked the treasury doors behind him. The chests were transported out of the city

through the south gates, and would take the water route back to Riverwave Estate.

It wouldn't matter who came to take over Pei County's management and send the remaining money back to the imperial court; not much would be left after exchanging hands. Zhao Chao wouldn't be short of things requiring funds in the coming future, so he needed to hide away as much money as possible.

A boat was already arranged and waiting. You Miao flashed Li Zhifeng's badge, only sighing in relief after the chests had safely left the city.

By early morning, while You Miao dozed in a side hall of the government office, a soldier entered the room and announced, "Lord Li has entered the city. Will Lord You be meeting with him, or continue to rest?"

You Miao jolted awake. After he yawned, he finally became fully conscious when he saw Li Zhifeng sitting next to him. "When did you come back?" he asked.

"An hour ago," Li Zhifeng replied. "Pei County City is now in da-ge's hands, we can withdraw."

"Let's go, then," You Miao said. "Round up our people and return to the estate."

Nie Dan's army was the main force and You Miao's team was only there to assist, so they shouldn't usurp his role. However, just as they were about to leave, Nie Dan also came back to the government office.

"Twelve thousand enemies eliminated, four thousand captives, and four thousand escaped," Nie Dan declared.

You Miao sighed in relief. A whole twenty thousand men from the Xianbei army were sent running after one battle, just like that. The imperial heavens were truly watching over Tianqi.

“Where’s Commander General Valthorn? I’ve got a few things to ask him,” Nie Dan then asked.

“In the inner yard, all tied up,” You Miao said.

Nie Dan didn’t even stop for a drink of water before headed there. Just as he left, Li Yan came in, surrounded by military escort. As soon as he walked in, he threw a letter at You Miao.

“And here I thought we were actually going to negotiate peace. I didn’t expect you guys to pull something like this,” he griped.

Chuckling, You Miao opened the envelope and saw that it was the negotiation document Sun Yu had put together for Li Yan. Yet there was only a single sentence written on it: *Once General Nie’s plan to coordinate offence from both inside and out is put into effect, you may enter and secure Pei County City.*

You Miao burst out laughing. “Just so you know, I never colluded with my teacher on this.”

Smiling without mirth, Li Yan said, “You two are an old fox and a baby fox; I’m done chattering with you. Where’s the treasury?”

“I don’t know, ask Nie-da-ge,” You Miao answered lazily.

Thus, Li Yan went to find Nie Dan. As soon as he was gone, You Miao stood up and turned to Li Zhifeng.

“Withdraw!”

And the two rounded up their soldiers and hightailed it outta there.

The securing of Pei County City lasted for three whole days. Nie Dan’s army had fought the best turnaround battle since their return to Jiangnan, and the citizens of Yang Prefecture cheered from the sides of the street as they welcomed Nie Dan into the city. Li Zhifeng had won impressive military achievements as well, and was awarded twenty taels of gold.

Twenty taels of gold. You Miao only gave the stack a brief glance before the blocks were tossed into the storeroom.

"How did it go today?" You Miao asked.

"Everything's settled now," Li Zhifeng said as he changed into his butler robes. "Da-ge has done a heroic deed, and now everyone is calling for an expedition to the north."

Easy for them *to say,* You Miao thought. Fighting a winning battle and recovering the whole Central Plains region weren't exactly the same thing. As soon as he had given his answer, Li Zhifeng turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" You Miao called after him.

"To make you food," Li Zhifeng said, heading for the kitchen.

You Miao followed him and asked, "No one said anything else?"

"Lao-San [14] said the coronation will be delayed for two days. The date is now the fifth of the sixth month," Li Zhifeng said.

He kept calling Zhao Chao "Lao-San," and You Miao was a little unused to it. He reminded him, "You can't call him that at court, okay? Or those ministers will eat you alive…"

"Understood."

"Anything else?" You Miao pushed.

Li Zhifeng gave You Miao a questioning look, then washed his hands and entered the kitchen. Mrs. Qian and a few of the boy servants who were preparing vegetables shuffled to make room for him.

"Regarding what?" Li Zhifeng asked.

You Miao hugged him from behind and relaxed against his back while Li Zhifeng rolled up his sleeves to join in on the vegetable prep.

"Money," You Miao probed.

“No one knows you stole money from Pei County’s treasury,” Li Zhifeng said. “Even if they knew, they wouldn’t dare ask. Don’t worry.”

“…”

Li Zhifeng laughed, and You Miao asked, feeling incredibly awkward, “How did you know?”

Amused, Li Zhifeng replied, “How would I not notice the new additions at home?”

You Miao abruptly discovered that Li Zhifeng had become much more jovial lately, and seeing him happy put him in a cheerful mood, too. After some thought, he asked, “Has my teacher mentioned me?”

Li Zhifeng shook his head.

A soldier came just then, and asked, “Where’s General Huwei?”

“The general is cooking!” Mrs. Qian answered in a shout.

The soldier poked his head into the kitchen and said, “General, Lord Lin of Yang Prefecture’s Department of Military Defense invites you to a banquet.”

“Not going,” Li Zhifeng said. “Ask if Lord Huang will go.”

And so, the soldier left. His initial arrival reminded Li Zhifeng of something, however, and he asked You Miao, “Are you going to Lao-San’s coronation?”

“Nah. It’s not like I have an official position,” You Miao said.

“Earlier today, Ping Xi and the others were all asking whether you would be attending.”

You Miao made a non-committal noise. He contemplated for a moment, then asked, “Did my teacher really not say anything about me?”

“No,” Li Zhifeng said.

At the end of the fifth month, another person had come from Yang Prefectural City to borrow money from You Miao. This time, it was the butler from Li Yan's old residence. The Tang family that Li Yan's wife came from was also a major house, so even if You Miao didn't lend the ransom money, Li Yan would ask his former father-in-law. The second butler, who You Miao had let leave the imperial capital, was still working for Li Yan. Knowing that You Miao was favored by the emperor, he didn't dare raise his voice.

"How much?" You Miao asked.

"Twenty thousand silver," the butler replied respectfully. He quieted and didn't elaborate after having spoken, and stood in the corridor outside the main hall, his eyes lowered.

You Miao knew Li Yan had already figured out that he'd played tricks on the sly, and was probably demanding a share. After a long deliberation, he said, "Take fifteen thousand with you, I'm almost out."

The butler uttered his thanks and stamped the loan note with Li Yan's seal. You Miao stared at him.

"The Tang family isn't paying to have their miss brought back?"

The butler gave a light shake of his head and replied quietly, "The Tang family is not willing to pay this ransom. They said they consider the matter as if she has already passed away."

This filled You Miao with rage, but it was not his place to comment on other people's family affairs, so he sent the butler off with the silver money bills. He kept the taels of actual silver for himself.

Around sunset, Cheng Guangwu came to report news from Yang Prefectural City.

"Shaoye."

He took out a bulletin from his sleeve; it was a notice that the Administration Chamber was recruiting pupils. The full name of this

agency was “The Resplendent Tianqi Counsel Administration Chamber,” and it was established by the previous dynasty. It brought together students from far and wide in order to consult the public on matters of governance. After Tianqi’s grand founder conquered the lands, the agency was shut down. But now, Zhao Chao was reopening its doors. On the sixth of the sixth month, after the coronation of the new emperor, a public government inquiry would be held, and those who came out on top in the debate would be hired.

“The Administration Chamber…” You Miao skimmed the bulletin and was going to toss it, but something seemed fishy. He asked, “Is there news from the city? Who gave you this?”

Respectfully, Cheng Guangwu said, “This lowly one saw the government office was distributing papers and shouting that anyone who wants to be an official should attend. So I collected a sheet for shaoye to take a look. Shaoye’s teacher is the Political Advisor, so naturally there is no need to mind something like this.”

Something clicked in You Miao’s head. Sun Yu was the Political Advisor, a title that was also commonly known as the Chancellor. So what did the re-opening of the Administration Chamber imply? To promote new personnel to serve Zhao Chao? Lin Luoyang had previously mentioned that the Master of the Books position at the Administration Chamber was being reserved for him. Did this mean that the new recruits Sun Yu brought in would be the team he was going to lead?

Whatever. He would think about it after Li Zhifeng returned.

However, the Son of Heaven was going to be crowned in a matter of days; the military was swamped. Patrols, imperial escorts, arranging the honorary guards, and many more matters were on the military’s plate. When Li Zhifeng still didn’t come back after You Miao waited until deep into the night, he went to bed on his own.

The next morning, as You Miao roused and yawned, he discovered he was wrapped in Li Zhifeng’s arms. The moment he looked up, Li Zhifeng woke.

“Political Advisor Sun asked me to pass you a letter,” Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao was sleepily dressing himself, but when he heard, he immediately perked up.

“Show me?”

You Miao took the letter and ripped open the envelope. There was once again a verse: *Even though I do not go to you, why do you not come?* [15]

You Miao stared at the words in a daze, knowing that the time had come at last for him to take on his official post.

“Lao-San will be enthroned in a few days,” Li Zhifeng said. “Are you going?”

“Yes.” You Miao started to laugh. That teacher of his sure was funny. After all the twists and turns, the acting had only been done for You Miao’s sake.

It was nearly harvest time again for the early season grain. In the following days, You Miao rolled up his sleeves and personally reaped rice with the entire estate, considering it as a farewell to the leisurely life he had led in the past few months. On the fourth of the sixth month, since Li Zhifeng was in Yang Prefectural City to prepare for the grand accession ceremony, You Miao packed up his own bags to get ready to set off.

Qiao Jue watched as You Miao directed the boy servants to pack what he needed. “Miao-zi, do you need to take this much stuff with you to Yang Prefectural City this time?”

“What do you think?” You Miao laughed.

It only took Qiao Jue a moment of thought to realize You Miao was off to become an official. He exclaimed joyously, “Do good, Miao-zi! What did that emperor brother of yours promise you?”

You Miao replied helplessly, “I’m off to sell myself to the royal family, not to mention my teacher will be watching me, too. How much d’you think I can even skim, huh?”

The two met eyes and burst out laughing. Qiao Jue said merrily, “You’re not going too far away this time, it’s only half a day’s journey on foot. It’s all good. I’ll just visit you often in the city.”

You Miao nodded. “Once government affairs settle, I’ll be moving back to stay at the estate anyway.”

Despite what he said, however, You Miao was well aware that it would be impossible for anything to settle in the next half a year at least. Qiao Jue asked if You Miao would give You Dechuan a heads up about his departure, but You Miao said to not alert him just yet. In any case, You Hange’s job at the Ministry of Revenue would begin very soon, so he could help deliver word when the time came.

Using four iron poles, the boy servants hauled several giant chests onto the carriages; there were two carriages, and two chests were loaded into each. Qiao Jue quickly understood what they were.

“Those are…” he said.

With a cheeky grin, You Miao said, “Xiao-jiu, my donation for this government position sure isn’t cheap, huh?”

Qiao Jue had seen the chests You Miao brought back from Pei County City that night; each chest was a thousand and two hundred pounds or five thousand pounds apiece; there was a total of eighty thousand taels of pure silver. Changyuan, who was driving, gave a shout and spurred the horses. They whinnied and stomped their feet for a while before the carriage finally rocked and departed.

You Miao bade Qiao Jue farewell and leisurely went on his way. His destination: Yang Prefectural City.

[Chapter 41]

It was bustling and lively everywhere within the border of Yang Prefecture on this afternoon of the fourth of the sixth month. Ever since Nie Dan's victorious return, word had been spreading among the people that plans for reclaiming the Central Plains were in the works, and everyone was dying to see that happen. The Jiangnan locals wanted the northern gentry to leave as soon as possible, and to stop taking up space here. The major houses of the Central Plains all hoped to do just that.

The gentry of Jiangbei's Liu Prefecture were especially anxious. Now that Pei County had become the frontline, moving another one hundred miles north would have them face to face with the Jie tribe. If Tianqi did not issue a northern expedition, then the military base in Pei County could not move and the people of Liu Prefecture could not go home.

Zhao Chao was bogged down by the memorials to the throne coming in one after the other; they were piled so high they had created a mountain. The coronation was taking place the next day, yet he was spending the entire day of the eve working through government affairs. Reports from Sun Yu's office were also being sent over ceaselessly; the renovations at the villa in Maocheng had just finished, various regions were harvesting the early season. The names on the Six Ministries' registries flew by in a flurry. Food provisions going to Nie Dan would have trouble catching up soon, and the northern civil officials wanted to use the recently-won battle as a bargaining chip to negotiate for peace and the return of the two stranded emperors.

Zhao Chao stared at that last report in silence for a long time.

As rays of the setting sun shone into the palace, Zhao Chao heaved a long sigh and rose to his feet. He walked to the window and stood there with his hands clasped behind.

Suddenly, there was commotion outside the hall. "What's going on?" Zhao Chao demanded.

A soldier hurried in. “Someone entered the palace through the back doors. He is holding General Li Zhifeng’s commander’s seal and is requesting an audience with Your Majesty.”

“Someone from Riverwave Estate?” Zhao Chao asked. “Who is it?”

“He doesn’t wish to be announced,” the soldier answered.

Zhao Chao’s straight brows creased, thinking that You Miao, the little bugger, was maybe a little too presumptuous. If he was going to send a boy servant to deliver word, he should at least be a little more sensible.

“Did he say anything else?” he asked.

“He said…he’s here to purchase an official position from Your Majesty,” the soldier replied hesitantly.

Instantly amused and exasperated, Zhao Chao instructed, “Make him wait in the side hall. We will go over in a bit.”

It was youshi time, and the oblique rays of the setting sun made the entire palace shimmer gold. The laborers from the Ministry of Public Works were still busy working on the last bit of repairs for the villa and hadn’t yet packed up. The columns still smelled of fresh paint that hadn’t yet dried. Zhao Chao pushed aside the memorials to the throne and walked into the side hall. When he arrived, You Miao spun around with a wide grin on his face.

“And here I was wondering who it could be,” Zhao Chao said. “Didn’t you say you weren’t coming?”

Irreverent, You Miao was sitting on a chest, hugging one knee. “I got enough cash prepped, so I’m here to buy an official position from you.”

He tossed Zhao Chao the key, while the latter burst out laughing. Zhao Chao ordered for the chests to be opened, yet he was stunned silent when he saw their contents.

“Where’d all this money come from?” Zhao Chao was in disbelief.

“Eighty thousand silver,” You Miao said. “What position will you give me?”

“Don’t joke. You didn’t sell the estate and drag all your money over, did you?” Zhao Chao asked.

You Miao waved dismissively and approached, throwing him a punch. Then the two pulled each other into a tight hug that expressed what they couldn’t say in words. When they separated, Zhao Chao’s eyes were damp as he stared fixedly at You Miao.

“Stay the night here at the palace,” Zhao Chao said. “Tomorrow, you can stand behind your teacher.”

You Miao laughed. “What, so you can leave a corner of your sleeve for me in bed when you get up in the morning? [16]-Nah, I’m just here to give you money, I know you’ve got plenty of places to spend it. I’m off.”

He pulled away and turned to leave.

“Wait!” Zhao Chao called after him.

You Miao didn’t look back, however, and only waved his sleeve as he hopped across the threshold and exited the door. Li Zhifeng was waiting for him in the garden, and when You Miao emerged, he looped his arm around his shoulder and the two left together.

“How much money did you give him?” Li Zhifeng had caught a glimpse of that giant chest inside.

Relieved of the heavy burden, You Miao answered with a hand gesture. Thus, Li Zhifeng said, “Got my army pay today. I’ll take you out to eat something good.”

You Miao wanted to laugh every time he saw Li Zhifeng count and plan with that little salary bestowed by the royal family. The salary for a fifth rank officer was twenty silver a year; it was even dispensed early this year, in the fifth month, because of the new emperor’s ascension.

“Go eat at our own restaurant?” You Miao asked with a grin.

“I’m taking you for some freshwater seafood,” Li Zhifeng said.

That night, the pair rode back to Yang Prefectural City. Li Zhifeng hired an entire small riverboat for the occasion. The city was abuzz with a festive air and the streets bustled with activity. Tomorrow, all the shops in the entire city would be closed as everyone planned to swarm Maocheng’s villa to watch the new emperor pray to the heavens and ascend the throne. A lone red lantern hung over the small boat, and it swayed with the summer breeze. Meanwhile, the entire shoreline shone with the dreamlike red lantern lights of the night markets.

The sight reminded You Miao of Nie Dan, who he once saw releasing a lantern into the capital’s river. A thought struck him, and he asked, “Where’s da-ge?”

“Still guarding the frontlines,” Li Zhifeng said.

“Is he not coming back for tomorrow, then?” You Miao asked. When Li Zhifeng nodded, You Miao thought, *What a shame.*

The fact that Nie Dan did not have the time to come back for Zhao Chao’s coronation would probably become a regret. But Nie Dan’s sense of duty was strong and profound; since he was commanding the garrison of Pei County, it was inevitable that he had to stay.

“This is his gift to you.” Li Zhifeng took out a folding fan and handed it to You Miao.

Delighted, You Miao opened it up to see a poetry verse written with vigorous and spirited strokes: *Match with an adversary face to face and the brave will emerge victorious.* [17] The bottom was stamped with Nie Dan’s personal seal. You Miao was stunned.

“Nie-da-ge’s writing is *this* good?” he said, shocked.

Li Zhifeng said impassively, “He says this fan is to serve as a self-reminder.”

You Miao turned the fan over in his hands, examining it carefully. Then he chuckled, unable to hold back. “Is he telling me that if there comes a day I go to court, I’ll have to speak in the military’s favor without shrinking back?”

Li Zhifeng’s lips curled slightly. “That’s probably it.”

You Miao pictured in his head the day he’d enter court and engage in a battle of words with Li Yan and the others. When he couldn’t outspeak them, he would snap open the fan in rage and flash the large, startling words on it—Nie Dan’s powerful aura, that of a lone rider who’d charge ahead of a cavalry of millions, would infuse him. The entire imperial court of civil and military officials alike would be shocked into silence without needing another word more from him. Heck yeah, that would feel *so good* !

“I’ve got one, too, that I haven’t opened,” Li Zhifeng said.

“What does it say? Show me?” You Miao quickly asked.

Li Zhifeng took out another folding fan, and You Miao opened it to find another single verse: *Those who excel in war have no illustrious military exploits.* [18]

You Miao gawked. He immediately threw his own fan aside, snubbing it, and only wanted Li Zhifeng’s. He thought it over, then asked sheepishly, “Can I switch with you…?”

Li Zhifeng was confused at first, but it quickly transformed into a smile as he stared at You Miao and took the fan from him. You Miao made a grab for it, but Li Zhifeng raised it out of his reach.

You Miao cried, “Gimme, gimme…”

“I can give it to you, but you have to explain why you like it better,” Li Zhifeng said, looking stern.

He was only teasing You Miao, however. So when You Miao finally managed to snatch the fan in Li Zhifeng’s hands, he opened it again and

opened his own, too. The more he stared at the fans, the more he became fond of them.

"This is a verse from *'The Art of War'* by Sun Tzu," You Miao explained. "Before, when my teacher taught me his work, I didn't fully understand. But now I sort of do."

"Does it mean I shouldn't fight for the sake of recognition? That one must see the wood for the trees?" Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao waved. "No, it's more like, ones who excel in war can subdue enemies without having to fight…"

Li Zhifeng nodded slowly, seeming thoughtful.

You Miao added, "But not entirely. He's reminding you that to fight a battle, you have to take everything into account: the time and place, yourself and the enemy, and all favorable conditions. All unforeseen circumstances must be considered, too. Very rarely will a commander sink his own army into a quagmire, nor will his decisions make a comeback possible when the army is facing imminent defeat."

"Oh." Li Zhifeng nodded.

You Miao continued, "In other words, those who genuinely know how to fight won't run into the need to reverse a losing situation, nor will they ever be in a position to be all-powerful. War isn't for the sake of a few men's recognition, either. It's for the sake of the world…"

"I get it," Li Zhifeng said. "You keep it, then."

You Miao laughed. "You take it. I like mine better now."

After careful consideration, the verse Nie Dan had gifted Li Zhifeng was indeed very useful to him. As for the verse Nie Dan had gifted him… You Miao had to admit that sometimes he *did* get carried away by the games politicians play and would become more evasive and accommodating, but lose a lot of his own determination in the process.

Match with an adversary face to face and the brave will emerge victorious. Sometimes, one must not shrink back a single step—this was the great expectation Nie Dan had for him. You Miao solemnly put away his fan.

A thought struck him, and he wondered, “Is this his token of lo… our vows for us?”

“Mn. He doesn’t care for money and he doesn’t lust for titles, so he said you don’t need to return the gesture,” Li Zhifeng said.

Feeling awkward, You Miao said derisively, “Well, *I’m* the only one of us who loves money…never mind. Oh yeah! What did he give Zhao… His M… What’s written on the fan for San-ge?”

“ *The country is broken, yet the mountains and rivers remain* , [19] ” Li Zhifeng replied.

“...” You Miao was speechless.

It might not be altogether correct to say the country was broken, since the south was still around. But if they had to be technical about it, then indeed the verse rang true—the nation was sundered, but the land was still around. It was also a poignant reminder for Zhao Chao.

“And what verse did he give himself?” You Miao asked.

“Don’t know.” Li Zhifeng smiled. “You can ask him yourself next time.”

You Miao sighed, his mind weighed down with a myriad of thoughts, and all sorts of emotions rushed to his head. The three most gratifying things in his life were: getting together with Li Zhifeng, having someone like Nie Dan as a da-ge, and to have become the pupil of a teacher like Sun Yu.

Li Zhifeng listened quietly as You Miao told him about the message Sun Yu had sent him. Afterward, he only nodded in response. “Understood. Go on, then.”

After downing a few cups of wine and eating a bit of seafood, You Miao felt the dishes in Yang Prefectural City were only so-so; the cuisine wasn't even as good as what Riverwave Estate offered, not to mention it was expensive. He made a few complaints in passing, and Li Zhifeng coaxed him with, "Have Mrs. Qian move in to cook for you."

Leaning over the boat rail, You Miao asked Li Zhifeng what he had been busy with for the past few days. Li Zhifeng didn't have much on his plate, though.

"I heard there's going to be an expedition?" he answered.

You Miao shook his head. "That's probably not going to happen, knowing my teacher's temperament. I'll be able to know more once I enter the Administration Chamber."

As they chatted, they noticed someone onshore approach, looking to find a good time drinking on the boats. However, every boat on the river was occupied.

"I'm from the Tang family. Who's on the boat? You can't even make room on such a large boat? It's not like I'll be a bother," the man demanded.

Li Zhifeng creased his brows. "Why are you Hans always like this?"

"Always like what?" You Miao was amused.

"When someone with power and influence comes along, those without a government position or who are lower in rank must call them lords and make way," Li Zhifeng said.

Still leaning over the railing, You Miao tilted his head to look at Li Zhifeng. "Have they been making you make way?"

Li Zhifeng answered with a "mn" and took a sip of wine. You Miao knew those people were bullying Li Zhifeng over the fact that he was a military officer, and that he was low in rank without power in his grasp.

“Watch how I deal with him,” You Miao said with a laugh.

You Miao waved the waiter over and told him, “Go pass on word to whoever’s down there. It doesn’t matter which lord he is, just tell him that the Tanhua is here.”

The waiter went and did as instructed, and it took but a second for that man on the shore to leave.

Li Zhifeng sighed woefully and You Miao burst out laughing, slapping his own leg. Then he dropped back into his arms and watched him drink. The night gradually deepened. The fancy boat split the waters as it sailed out to the river, and accompanying their cruise was vibrant guqin music from across the shore. The musician was from Su Prefecture and sang in the sweet, pleasant, lilting regional dialect; so charming it set one’s heart aflutter.

Lying in Li Zhifeng’s arms, You Miao reached up and caressed his handsome face. He asked quietly, “In the future, after the northern expedition and the land is recovered, what do you plan to do?”

“Lao-San promised me two things,” Li Zhifeng said. “One was lending me an army of fifty thousand, and giving me a piece of land to rebuild the Quanrong nation.”

You Miao was astonished by this. He laughed. “Did he really say that?”

Li Zhifeng nodded slowly. “The land from the border with Goryeo at the foot of Yin Mountain, all the way to east of Yanbian City, will be given to the Quanrong.”

You Miao knew that the former border between Goryeo and Tianqi was disputed land, but if Zhao Chao gave his word, he’d keep it. He probably planned on redefining the border after defeating the Goryeo there, and then sectioning out a piece of the land for the Quanrong.

You Miao laughed, amused. “Well, that’s a profitable business. With the Quanrong standing guard, we’ll have ourselves free watchmen,

and we won't ever need to fight Goryeo again… Mn, very good, very good. And the second thing he promised you?"

"To let me take you away," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao fell silent.

"Would you be willing?" Li Zhifeng asked.

You Miao didn't know how long it would take to quell the north and recover the Central Plains, and truth be told, it was something he hadn't yet considered since his return to Jiangnan. It could take ten years, fifteen years, or even twenty, thirty years… But at least one thing was certain—once the Tartars were driven out and the land reclaimed, there really wouldn't be any business left for him to attend.

"Yes." You Miao's answer was forthright. "By then, you'll probably be the Emperor of Quanrong."

"We can go wherever you like," Li Zhifeng said. "We don't have to stay at the foot of Yin Mountain."

"Okay," You Miao replied with a smile. Claiming a tiny piece of land beyond the border and turning it into a ranch could be a great joy in life, too.

Rulers since ancient times had always cast aside the bow once the bird was shot and killed the hounds for meat when the hares were bagged—in other words, the trusted aides were eliminated once they had outlived their usefulness. You Miao was well-read; he deeply understood that being close to the sovereign could be as perilous as lying with a tiger, so one must retire and rest on one's laurels. Li Zhifeng probably wouldn't know what that meant, but his decision had hit the mark by a fluke and solved the problem that had always troubled You Miao the most.

"What are you thinking about?" Li Zhifeng asked in a low whisper. His head was slightly bent, and his lips were red and soft and smelled of wine.

“Nothing much…” You Miao suddenly felt drowsy; the music drifting from the distance made everything feel surreal, like he was dreaming. His finger twirled and tugged at Li Zhifeng’s belt, so Li Zhifeng put down his winecup, lowered his head and pressed his lips against his.

You Miao pulled open Li Zhifeng’s outer robe, but a large hand reached into his own robe and made him moan with its caresses. It didn’t take long before both their robes were tugged askew, baring their chests. Their trousers were soon yanked off and discarded, and the two tangled together with their clothes in disarray.

Li Zhifeng pressed his strong chest against You Miao, and whispered into his ear, “Lord You.”

You Miao started to laugh as he gazed into his eyes. Li Zhifeng was no longer the same as he once was, and there was playfulness in his eyes. There were not the same as they once were; Li Zhifeng was no longer a slave, and You Miao was no longer his master. Yet the feeling in their hearts, their love for each other, had not faded one bit.

Rustling bamboo and gentle laughter whispered from across the distant shore, faint and indiscernible. You Miao and Li Zhifeng lay bare and engulfed in each other’s embrace. The night breeze breathed all around them as the lanterned boat left the heart of the river, causing the silk curtain to sway, partly showing and partly hiding their bodies. When You Miao looked up, ten miles of lantern light filled his vision. Li Zhifeng drove in powerfully once more, and not daring to moan aloud, You Miao held all of his cries inside.

As Li Zhifeng’s beast-like panting gradually calmed, he lay on top of You Miao. He opened You Miao’s legs and hugged his waist and wrapped both of them in their discarded robes.

For a long time, You Miao only gazed shyly at Li Zhifeng. Neither spoke. They then closed their eyes and held each other as they entered quiet slumber.

[Text Break]

On the fifth day of the sixth month, the new emperor ascended the throne and granted mercy to the world.

That day, a blazing sun as hot as fire scorched the whole city of Maocheng. There weren't many trees inside the away palace, but all the willows moved in from Yang Prefectural City had turned into dried sticks from the heat. All the officials, civil and military alike, were drenched in sweat as they stood outside the great hall listening to the drums.

Zhao Chao had arranged a spot specially for You Miao right outside Taihe Hall on the side, and You Miao could barely keep his eyes open because of the heat. After a night of pleasure the night before, he was a little unsteady on his feet. But rows of juniors from aristocratic families were all watching him with calculating eyes, wondering who he was. You Miao couldn't care less about introducing himself, so he only squinted his eyes and tried to generate a breeze by flapping his sleeve, and prayed that Zhao Chao's coronation would end soon so he could leave.

"Heaven above, Earth below… Bestow grace upon Tianqi…"

Zhao Chao's voice echoed from far in the distance. Someone standing up front was already about to pass out. Li Zhifeng led the Yang Prefecture's army and was standing on the outside perimeter—and wearing a shiny iron carapace, too. You Miao pointed at him from the distance, entertained. But Li Zhifeng pointed at his own forehead, gesturing that You Miao should wipe his own sweat.

Zhao Chao was standing on the Terrace of the Heavenly Altar reading the ascension proclamation out loud with a crown on his head. He was wearing black imperial robes with agate beads around his neck and was heavily adorned with regalia. If it wasn't for the fact that he was physically strong… If it was You Miao standing there for six hours, he'd probably pass out.

"This descendent of the Zhao family hereby proclaims to the Heavens… With the might of our millions of valiant commanders, the fragmented land will be reclaimed…"

It was solemn below the platform, and Zhao Chao's voice sounded faintly choked up. You Miao sighed inwardly.

"…Therefore I pray to the Virtue of Heaven."

The end of the oration was followed by a deafening *dang!* from the gong, and You Miao jumped with a start. But when he looked around, he found that all the officials appeared to have expected it. He was the only one whose heart had almost jumped out of his chest from the ordeal. Right after the gong, there came nine beats of the drum.

Dong… Dong …

When the drum stopped, Zhao Chao turned around and slowly descended the Terrace of the Heavenly Altar.

The Master of Ceremony took the lead and kneeled, making the proclamation, "Long live the emperor!"

"Long live the emperor…!"

"Long live…"

"The emperor…!"

The hollers were answered by multitudes and spread like the tides. The cries of "Long live the emperor!" were deafening, resounding within the away palace. Soon after, the cheers surged outside the imperial city, shaking the heaven and the earth; the number of citizens was so great that there was no end in sight, and all at once they kneeled.

With the imperial crown now bestowed upon him, the Son of Heaven lowered his head, the jade beads dangling before his brow. At that moment, You Miao found Zhao Chao inexplicably foreign.

After Zhao Chao had descended the high terrace, the civil and military officials automatically formed two groups and followed the newly-ascended emperor into Taihe Hall. You Miao didn't hold any office, so he stopped in front of Wumen Gate. The guards filed past him on his left and right, and the great gate of the Inner City closed with a loud rumble. At the

sight of You Miao, however, the two officers left a path for him to enter. They were obviously instructed by Li Zhifeng to do so.

Nevertheless, You Miao only stood there outside the gate and gave a light shake of his head. At a time like this, he didn't quite know what he was feeling. Under the scorching sun, this closed palace gate felt like it had forever severed something he and Zhao Chao shared—a certain relationship between them.

Perhaps Zhao Chao had sensed the same thing, which was why he had visited Riverwave Estate a month before his coronation to drink and be merry, and to solemnly tell You Miao: " *Let's become brothers by a different name.* "

You Miao smiled as he looked down at the bricks on the ground. Step by step, he left the compound. He had heard the sound of growing up — perhaps from this day forward, Zhao Chao would no longer be the same man he knew. Just as he, You Miao, would never again be the same You Miao from the past.

All of Maocheng was inundated by citizens who had come to catch a glimpse of the new emperor, and even though most of the crowds had dispersed, people were still everywhere. Deciding against trying to seek anyone, You Miao simply strolled about the new imperial city accompanied by the ceaseless and undulating chirping of cicadas from the side of the roads. All he wanted was to find a tea shop for a drink of water, but no matter where he went, it'd be packed with people talking excitedly about the coronation.

"Boss, give me some tea…" You Miao said.

"Got no more! Shaoye, go further down the street!"

You Miao was going to die of thirst. He shouted, "I'm not gonna sit, can't I just buy a bowl of tea?"

"There aren't any more tea bowls—!"

"Fucking hell…" You Miao grumbled.

He searched the entire long street, but astonishingly, not a single place was available for tea—it was driving him insane. He yelled angrily, “Is there not even a sip of water to drink in the imperial capital, now?!”

He had only just made his complaint when a yell sounded from the distance.

“Someone’s dying!”

“This man is dying! Is there a doctor anywhere?”

Interest piqued, You Miao went over to where a crowd of young men was gathering. Lying by the foot of the inner city wall was an old beggar who looked pale and at death’s door. The young men didn’t seem to care to help, however; they only hollered like they were watching a spectacle. At the sight of You Miao approaching, they deserted the beggar entirely.

Immediately, You Miao went to examine the beggar, and upon realizing he was suffering from heatstroke, he carried him on his back to search for a cool, shaded place. He scanned the area as he walked. When he spotted a government office-like place with its front doors open, he rushed inside without bothering to ask for permission.

It was empty inside; he reckoned everyone had gone to watch the coronation, so he laid the old beggar down on the floor of the main hall and went to the yard to draw water. He drank his fill of water first next to the water vat, then he brought a water scoop back inside and poured its contents over the beggar’s head.

A man’s voice suddenly shouted from behind them. “Where did you come from? What audacity!”

You Miao jumped in surprise and quickly turned around. He looked the other man up and down. Before him stood a man whose cheeks were red and lips were pale. He was covered in sweat and his shoulders were half-soaked. Obviously, he had just returned from the event.

You Miao explained, “A senior fainted from heatstroke outside…”

“Go, go! Get the hell out of here, *now* !” cried the man. “Do you think this is a place you can just walk into?”

You Miao’s temper flared—the hot weather had already put him in a bad mood. He immediately rebuked, “No one’s watching the doors and no one’s giving a shit. The doors were wide open. Aren’t government offices built by the people’s money? Why *can’t* we enter, huh?!”

The man didn’t bother with You Miao anymore, however. He roared, “Guards! Beat this unruly man out the door!”

You Miao laughed at that. “Go call for an officer, I dare you. We’ll see who gets beaten.”

The man froze for a moment, then he took a closer look at You Miao. Concluding that You Miao didn’t appear to be an ordinary person, he demanded again with suppressed anger, “What’s your name? Are you actually doing this intentionally, or did you just walk in by mistake? Look up and see what this place is.”

Reflexively, You Miao turned around and looked up at the establishment plaque hanging above his head. It read: “Administration Chamber.”

“…”

If there was anywhere in the world where You Miao wouldn’t dare to go wild, it’d be under Sun Yu’s watch. Aside from Sun Yu, not even the imperial palace could stop him. As soon as You Miao realized this was the Administration Chamber, most of his confidence deflated. He looked back at the man, who was most likely an official here, and all of a sudden You Miao was feeling a little friendlier. He smiled and his tone warmed up.

“We’re on the same side.” Then he bowed and said seriously to the man, “I have yet to learn your esteemed name, brother. This humble one is You Miao, You Ziqian.”

“Who’s on the same side with you?” the man huffed.

You Miao frowned a little at his response. Soon after, throngs of others began to come in. One of them was startled when he walked through the doors. He looked You Miao up and down, then looked at the old beggar.

“Qiwen, what’s going on here?” the newcomer asked the man.

“Where are the guards outside?” the man demanded, turning around. “ *I* should be the one asking *you* . There wasn’t a single person inside the Administration Chamber today; everyone went out. If anything happened, who would be responsible?”

“Tang-xiong, peace. Calm down,” another man said.

The number of people coming in was increasing, and they surrounded You Miao, peering at him in a calculating manner. You Miao didn’t want to stir up any trouble, since Sun Yu would soon be returning. He was also going to be joining the Administration Chamber in the future, so if he had depended on Sun Yu’s appearance to resolve this situation, there’d be suspicion that he would rely on connections to pressure others.

Just then, the old beggar groaned, his complexion looking better. Thinking he’d rather avoid trouble if he could, You Miao decided he’d take the old man out to find a doctor.

“Forget it,” he said. “I’m gone. If fate is kind, I will see you guys again.”

The man said coldly, “Weren’t you all high and mighty just now? Now you want to leave? Not so fast. Is the Administration Chamber a place you can come and go as you will? *Guards* !”

The guards outside had returned as well, and they poured into the hall at the man’s call, surrounding You Miao at once.

“Arrest him and take him to the Ministry of Justice! Have Lord Xie handle him!” the man ordered.

You Miao instantly discomfited—who the hell was this guy? Why does he act even more pompous than *him* ? You Miao had always thought

that he was pretty pompous already, but he had never imagined that he'd run into someone ever more so!

He vaguely recalled that this guy was named Tang, so he ventured, "You're from the Tang family of Ganchi, Yi Prefecture?"

The crowd snickered at his question, as if he had failed to recognize greatness and had now realized what he had gotten himself into.

"Drop it, Tang Bo. Lord Sun will be back soon," someone tried to advise the man. "This guy is probably just some unruly citizen who doesn't know the gravity of things, so why bother with him? Have the guards drive him out and leave it at that…"

You Miao finally could stand this no longer. "Forget it. Let's go to the Ministry of Justice."

This group of young men were fairly pompous, and he had never seen them before, so he figured they were juniors from Yang and Yi Prefectures' gentry. It only took him a moment of thought to realize that the various major clans had perhaps placed their own clansmen in Sun Yu's Administration Chamber. You Miao would be entering this office soon, and clashes with them would be inevitable; he could not appear weak right now.

"Not gonna lie, Tang-xiong, forget the fact that you aren't even the Administration Chamber's executive administrator. Even if you were," You Miao said with a chuckle, "I can come and go as I please in the main halls of the six ministries, General Nie's main camp, and even His Majesty's palace — never mind this place. Do you believe me?"

As soon as he'd spoken, the crowd exclaimed accusations of impertinence.

"What's your name again? You-something?" Tang Bo asked, frowning with annoyance.

Earlier when You Miao gave his name, only Tang Bo had heard. The others who came afterward didn't catch it, but they all fell silent now that it had been spoken once more.

“Is it…is it You Miao?”

Someone had sensed something amiss by now. The dozens of officials in the yard began to whispering to each other, and Tang Bo spun around to question You Miao further. But You Miao was done with him.

“Farewell, brothers. May we meet again,” You Miao said as he helped the beggar up. Just as he was about to leave, however, another person came.

“Lord Li has arrived—!” announced the guard.

“The Hanlin [20] is here…”

The group frantically turned around, and just as Tang Bo was at a loss for what to do, Li Yan entered. His mind was occupied, and coming to face with You Miao so abruptly baffled him. He then surveyed everyone else in the yard.

“B…brother-in-law?” Tang Bo greeted tentatively.

“You bugger. Why are you here, instead of at Luoyang Palace?” Li Yan asked You Miao.

You Miao laughed. “The ceremony’s over, so I came out for a stroll. The palace is crowded, so I won’t bother squeezing myself in. Is this your little brother-in-law?”

Li Yan nodded, then he reprimanded the others, “What are you all standing around here for? Tang Bo, go bring me the government registry.”

Everyone was dumbfounded. Tang Bo was taken aback at first, then immediately bowed and went back inside. Covered in sweat and still limping as he walked, Li Yan helped You Miao get the beggar upright.

“Are there carriages outside?” You Miao asked.

Li Yan nodded. Just as he was about to ask more questions, however, You Miao raised a hand to stop him. Once Tang Bo returned with

the registry and handed it to Li Yan, You Miao followed Li Yan out under the watchful eyes of everyone, still assisting the beggar all the while.

Once they climbed into a coach, You Miao explained everything to an utterly confused Li Yan.

"Your teacher took in another pupil; it's Tang Bo. Didn't you know?" Li Yan asked him.

Now it was You Miao's turn to be dumbstruck. And after Li Yan explained the situation to him, he learned that it was just as he had guessed. Tang Bo was from a branch of the Tang family in Jiangnan. In the past, prior to Madam Tang's marriage, she was weak with illness and was nursed in Tang Bo's house. Although they were only cousins, they shared a good friendship because they grew up together.

After the Central Plains had fallen to enemy occupation, Sun Yu stabilized the situation in Jiangnan. In order to win the support of the locals, he greatly promoted the juniors of Jiangnan's gentry. Among them, Tang Bo's talents were the most recognized by Sun Yu. When You Miao was young, although Tang Bo's reputation was spread far and wide in Yi Prefecture, it was nonetheless limited to Jiangdong, the east region of the Yangtze. The Tang family rarely interacted with the You family, which was why You Miao didn't know him.

"What's his position?" You Miao asked.

"Master of the Books in the Administration Chamber," Li Yan replied. "Take away your teacher, and the Administration Chamber will fall under his control. Now you know why I was concerned about you. I *told* you to come back sooner to join the government, but you just wouldn't. My dear little lord…"

He trailed off and quietly watched You Miao.

You Miao was feeling a bit upset. Lin Luoyang had told him the other day that the position of the Master of the Books in the Administration Chamber was reserved for him, so where in the world did Tang Bo come

from? You Miao knew very well what Li Yan meant; he probably thought Sun Yu wasn't reliable.

In spite of this development, You Miao still trusted Sun Yu's arrangement, so he forced himself to cheer up and smile. But he didn't comment any more on the matter.

Li Yan also stopped after he had made his point, so for the moment, neither of the two spoke. Li Yan turned his gaze on the smelly old beggar inside the coach and said, "Send him to the doctor in the city?"

"Yeah. Thanks for the trouble."

You Miao's response was absent-minded, as his head was now busy spinning gears. But then he noticed Li Yan staring at him with a sobering gaze.

"What?" he asked, a little confused.

Li Yan gave a smile. "Well, I'd never thought that someone like you would care to save an old man like this —someone who's fought in battles wearing belts of severed heads and who's clawed his way out of mountains of corpses. What are you, a saint?"

You Miao said seriously, "It's not the same. I certainly can't save anyone when lives are lost in the millions. But I ran into a case that can be solved with just the lifting of a finger, if I can save him, I will. Those millions of lives and this old man's one life are all equal."

Li Yan snorted. "Who exactly taught you that?"

You Miao grinned. "You wouldn't understand. I'm off!"

He hopped off the carriage. It was already near dusk in Maocheng, and the crowds had gradually dispersed. Still miserably warm, You Miao pondered what he should do next as he walked.

What exactly was Sun Yu planning? It was becoming increasingly difficult for You Miao to decipher his behavior. Tang Bo's appearance might have been an unavoidable occurrence due to the new government's attempt

at winning over Jiangnan's Tang family, but why keep this information from him? If Sun Yu had plans to pass the Political Advisor position to You Miao one day, then why did he promote Tang Bo to the position of Master of the Books?

The northern gentry and Jiangnan's regional gentry had become the greatest powers that could influence the new government's decisions… So, should he go to the policy debate hosted by the Administration Chamber tomorrow?

[Chapter 42]

That night, You Miao went to the Yang Prefecture Department at the Maocheng government office to look for Li Zhifeng, but Li Zhifeng wasn't back yet. A boarding room at the government office was cleaned especially for them. Qiao Jue was at the shops in Yang Prefectural City, and when he learned later in the evening that You Miao was in Maocheng, he sent food and daily necessities and the capable Changyuan to attend their personal needs.

Late at night, a soldier came with the message that General Li had gone to patrol and might not return. Thus, You Miao went to bed right after dinner.

Early morning the next day, You Miao decided to make a trip to the Administration Chamber after all. He had to meet with Sun Yu no matter what, to see what instructions he might have. However, although it was early in the morning, the west streets were already teeming with crowds—almost all the scholars in Jiangnan had come to the Administration Chamber. You Miao stood at the front and watched; a giant ring was set up in front of the Administration Chamber with dozens of rows of seats.

"Hey, who do you think would dare to go up?" someone asked, craning their neck.

A bunch of people laughed as they pushed and shoved each other.

"Shaoye," Changyuan asked, "Will you go up to debate?"

You Miao laughed. "Interesting," he said. "There's no rush, let's see how this plays out first."

Just as he spoke, officers banged gongs to open a path. Yet no one seemed to be coming through. It was a long time before Tang Bo emerged and settled himself in one of the central seats. The scholars outside started to whisper among themselves, clicking their tongues in awe and admiration.

You Miao had to admit that Tang Bo's unhurried disposition certainly carried the grace of a prominent house. It wasn't the same air the

You clan possessed— You Dechuan was indeed the wealthiest in the region in the past, but he was a nouveau riche who started from nothing. Aside from the aristocratic Qiaos on his maternal side, You Dechuan's Sunshower Tea Estate was significantly inferior compared to the great clans from regions like Yi and Yang Prefectures.

Coming from three generations of affluence, Tang Bo's power firmly secured him as the head of the gentry with a group of scholars clamoring around and lauding him. It was very like the extravagant pomp Li Yan used to have back in the capital. However, these rich boys of Jiangnan were nonetheless different from how they were in the capital— Jiangnan boys were learned and knew what it meant to study hard.

At the sound of the gong, the people began to quiet down. The Administration Chamber's young supervisory secretaries emerged and took their seats. One of them stood up and cleared his throat.

"The Emperor inquires matters of policy from the people. With special permission from the Political Advisor, all persons, with or without honorary titles, shall be seen as equals and may speak as they wish."

This proclamation actually stopped anyone from going up instead.

The official added, "This meeting is hosted by Master of the Books, Tang of the Administration Chamber. It will go until sundown. Will Lord Master of the Books provide us with today's policy subject?"

While the official was talking, Tang Bo went up and untied the scroll next to the gong. With a tug on the string, the silk scroll flapped as it rolled open. Upon it were two words: Northern Expedition.

There was instantly an uproar among the scholars, and Tang Bo announced in a loud and clear voice, "The lands of the north have fallen, the vast Central Plains are occupied by the Barbarian Tribes. Presently, Tianqi is hard-pressed defending Jiangnan. The Emperor and Lord Political Advisor ask everyone: when should the northern expedition take place? How should we go about it?"

No one dared make a sound.

Sun Yu sure is gutsy, opening with such a heavy-duty topic, and the easiest to start quarrels with too, You Miao thought.

Now that the new emperor was enthroned, this was the issue at the forefront of everyone's minds, in both the government and the citizenry. "Northern Expedition" might have appeared to be two very simple words, but it involved civil life, war, division of power, and division of land. If a war effort was to be relaunched, it would for certain drain an enormous number of resources from the south, but it remained to be seen whether the conclusion would be victory.

It could be confidently stated that not a single Jiangnan local wished for an impulsive northern expedition. However, the immense number of northerners who had poured into the south and were stranded for the long term would drain resources from the Jiangnan region. Thus, the best-case scenario would be to have the northerners spend their own money to raise troops and recover the lands at their earliest chance.

After much buzz, a man walked into the ring, drawing everyone's attention.

The man cupped his hands in a salute to the crowd. "Lin Yuezhi of Su Prefecture greets my lords present."

Tang Bo sat back in his seat and nodded at the man, and the young supervisory secretaries in the seats behind remained silent.

"Looking forward to hearing Lin-xiong's expert arguments," Tang Bo said.

As You Miao watched this spectacle unfold, he could vaguely guess its point. This was a literary arena, and whoever went into the ring would figuratively engage in an oral battle against the six supervisory secretaries of the Administration Chamber by himself. This was gonna be good.

Lin Yuezhi began to speak. "It is still unknown when the two emperors in the north will return. That the new emperor should ask the people's opinions on policy after forming a new government is generally a good thing. However, this humble one is confused regarding one thing: the

northern expedition is a sure thing. Since ancient times, there has never been any precedent for a nation handing over home territories on a silver platter. Do His Majesty and Political Advisor Sun really have so little idea of when to set out that they have to resort to asking the people?"

Tang Bo's face fell as laughter passed through the audience. It dawned on You Miao, however, and he laughed under his breath. "A question like this is obviously probing for the Jiangnan public's sentiment."

Sure enough, before Tang Bo could rebuke, Lin Yuezhi continued, "There is naught but two purposes for proposing such a question: to probe the attitude of the northerners, and to probe the sentiment of the Jiangnan people."

This was a sharp statement, and cheers instantly erupted from below the stage. You Miao held his breath for the man, secretly applauding him for his bravery. If this had been the peaceful era of years past, then speaking so plainly would've garnered him a whole lot of trouble. Although You Miao knew Zhao Chao wouldn't act unreasonably, he'd still leave Zhao Chao a bit of face if it were him speaking on the stage; he wouldn't lay Zhao Chao's intentions bare so blatantly.

The supervisory secretaries were all silent, so Lin Yuezhi continued, "In my foolish opinion, a great expedition to the north will set out not long after the coronation."

One of the supervisory secretaries stood and announced his own name, "Huang Xiwen of Liu Prefecture."

Changyuan whispered in You Miao's ear, "Shaoye, isn't Huang Xiwen the nephew of Pei County's Magistrate? The Juren who attended the exams the same year you did…"

You Miao nodded and gestured Changyuan to pay attention to the debate.

"Lin-xiong makes everything sound so easy," Huang Xiwen started. "The six prefectures of Jiangnan have only just settled down. Our army is fatigued and our food provisions are insufficient, so what do we have to

support a northern expedition? Only thirty thousand men of our great army of four hundred thousand escaped when the imperial capital fell, and now there is only General Nie's army of five thousand guarding Pei County. We need to draft soldiers. Without at least ten years' time, it'll be impossible to build up the strength necessary for a northern expedition. Starting war impulsively may excite grassroot rebellions."

"And in your opinion, how many men are needed for the northern expedition?" Lin Yuezhi asked.

A different supervisory secretary raised a finger. "At least one hundred thousand men and three years' worth of food rations."

"Huang-xiong has foresight, but in our present situation, now is actually the best time to go," Lin Yuezhi responded. "Firstly, General Nie Dan claimed victory with a single battle. In Pei County, he managed to defeat the Xianbei army of twenty thousand with the power of less than ten thousand men. The Five Barbarian Tribes each brought twenty thousand cavalry when they invaded our border, and now, the Xianbei tribe has been completely annihilated after General Nie's battle."

Face turning stern, Lin Yuezhi said, "Military morale is high right now, we can reclaim our land in a matter of days. With General Nie leading, all we need is the unity of the nation — to act as one mind in order to conscript soldiers from Jiangnan and transport rations. What can we not accomplish? If we indulge in stability, then with the wealth of Jiangnan, we will surely lose the motivation to progress after too much time passes!"

Tang Bo stood up and replied unhurriedly, "Have you ever asked whether the people of Jiangnan are willing to give their everything to assemble a great army to fight in the north?"

"No war!" someone shouted, and many others around him agreed.

Another man said, "All the grain levies and taxes, the conscriptions and trainings of these past years… Last year, one hundred thousand new recruits were transferred to the north to join General Tang Hui and the other generals, but how many of them died in battle? How many returned to

Jiangnan alive? And what came of it? The young men of Jiangdong never came back; all of them sacrificed for the nation, but the Central Plains were still lost…"

You Miao could sense the fury of the Jiangnan people had reached its peak. The moment someone below the ring spoke out, there was instantly an outpouring of passion from the crowd; opposing an immediate expedition to the north. Meanwhile, Lin Yuezhi, Tang Bo, and the others stood in silence in the ring. Finally, after the voices died down, one of the supervisory secretaries cleared his throat and made a hand gesture.

"If there is anyone with expert opinions, please do come onto the stage to discuss," the supervisory secretary said.

Quiet instantly fell over the crowd again.

"A bunch of wimps," Changyuan commented derisively.

You Miao gave him a smile and signaled that he shouldn't talk too much. After the founding of Tianqi, men of letters were no longer killed. While that might be the case, no one knew the temperament of the new emperor. And even if there was no killing in store, nothing could be done if one was deemed guilty of a crime and exiled to avoid the emperor's contempt—like Sun Yu had suffered in the past. Aside from Lin Yuezhi, no one knew what the Administration Chamber's attitude was like, so no one dared to make the first move too rashly.

The supervisory secretary who had quieted the crowd quiet stood up again and said, "I am surnamed Lin; my name is Lin Mai. I originate from the same house as Lin-xiong."

Lin was also a major house in Jiangnan. Lin Yuezhi appraised the supervisory secretary and nodded. You Miao secretly wondered if the two were actually from the same clan.

After a brief thought, Lin Mai asked Lin Yuezhi, "Does Yuezhi-xiong know how many people the grain of Jiangnan can support?"

Lin Yuezhi dismissed the question with a smile, “Enough to feed Tianqi for at least three to five years. If the Barbarians were to invade Jiangnan one of these days, would you still be able to stand there so indulgently haranguing me, brother?”

The scholars were growing rowdy again, and another man went up to the stage.

“Oh no, we mustn’t… Will the two Lin brothers…please listen…to my humble…word. We mustn’t go to war.”

The man walked up and cupped his hands to greet the crowd. The weather today was incredibly hot, and at high noon, everyone was sweating like a pig. When You Miao looked closer and recognized the man to be Chen Qing, the one Zhao Mao had appointed Bangyan during his reign, You Miao couldn’t resist laughing.

Chen Qing started, “Yesterday was His Majesty’s coronation. The night before…I observed the stars, and one trigram fortune [21] came to me. It was…Upper Six!”

Everyone was rendered speechless. The corners of Lin Yuezhi’s lips were twitching, and every member of the Administration Chamber was staring at Chen Qing.

Tang Bo tried, “Lord Imperial Astronomer, why don’t we…”

Chen Qing waved him off and gestured to the crowd. “Let…let me fin, finish…”

You Miao facepalmed, unable to bear the sight. A familiar mocking voice rang out from beside him.

“That guy ran off pretty quick back then. But as soon as he came back, he got the position of Deputy Imperial Astronomer.”

You Miao looked back and was surprised to find it was the Minister of Personnel, Lin Luoyang. “You’re here too? Got no work today?”

Resting an arm on You Miao's shoulder, Lin Luoyang explained, "The Ministry of Personnel is right around the corner, so I've come to check things out. There, look over there."

You Miao looked to where Lin Luoyang indicated and saw three other men standing on the other side of the ring: one was the Minister of War Ping Xi, one was the Vice Minister of Revenue Qin Shaonan, and one was someone he had never seen before.

The Ministry of Revenue was the authority that controlled food and money, and the major powers in Jiangnan would never let go of it willingly. Under the recommendation of the former Governor of Yang Prefecture, the position of minister was given to an official by the name of Xie from the local region. You Miao imagined that Zhao Chao had to have made a concession, but the vice minister position was given to someone from the north.

The Ministry of War managed military affairs; it needed northerners to push things forward. Furthermore, Ping Xi had directed the Ministry of War in the past, so the position of minister could belong to no one else. Lin Luoyang was thus the head of the Ministry of Personnel. Ping Xi made a sidestep, giving way to another man who nodded at You Miao in greeting.

Lin Luoyang said to You Miao, "His name is Xie Quan, the paternal nephew of the Vice Minister of Revenue. He's a lot like you; he also grew up in the capital and didn't have a good relationship with his clan. He wasn't around when you first came to the capital, and came back when you went back to Jiangnan. By the time you returned to take the exams, he'd gone back home again to attend his father's funeral. You guys literally just missed each other every time. He's on great terms with us."

You Miao got it. Lin Luoyang meant a simple three words: one of us.

"Li Yan didn't come today?" You Miao asked.

"His appearance isn't suitable for this occasion," Lin Luoyang explained.

Ping Xi made his way over with the other two in tow. He was covered in sweat. “Where’s His Majesty?”

You Miao gave a slight shake of his head, not knowing when Zhao Chao would show. Qin Shaonan, however, tilted his head toward the inside of the Administration Chamber.

“Do you not see how many guards are stationed in there?”

You Miao immediately understood — that meant Zhao Chao was most likely listening from behind the wall. Sun Yu was no doubt there as well, drinking tea…

The crowd burst out laughing just then, probably because of something else Chen Qing had said onstage.

Stuttering, Chen Qing griped, “What are you all laughing at? This is the le…lesson the ancestors passed down. None of you understand. Any changes in the Earth will be sensed by Heaven. Upper Six—the dragon battles in the wild, its blood the color of the world. It would be enormously inauspicious should the disaster of war be allowed right now. The new emperor has only just ascended the throne…”

“How much longer do you plan on letting this guy talk?” Ping Xi asked, looking long-suffering.

Like he was watching a good show, Qin Shaonan urged, “Miao-zi, quick, go up there. We bros are waitin’ for ya.”

You Miao knew it was time for him to go up, but he played it off cutely. “But look at the Tang family and the Bangyan, having so much fun. I’m just a little nobody, with no power or influence…”

The group laughed themselves silly and Ping Xi gave You Miao a shove to urge him to enter the ring, so You Miao climbed onto the stage. It was clamorous all around, all he heard from the gang was Qin Shaonan throwing him a “We’ll back you” and nothing more.

As soon as he entered the ring, the quarreling debaters quieted down. The supervisory secretaries mocking Chen Qing earlier also fell silent. When Chen Qing turned around, everyone else below the stage gradually became quiet too.

Holding his closed folding fan in reverse, You Miao first cupped his hands in greeting toward Chen Qing. “Lord Chen.”

Chen Qing quickly returned the courtesy. For a moment, he thought You Miao looked familiar, he just couldn’t figure out why. You Miao then turned to cup his hands at Tang Bo, who only snorted. The other supervisory secretaries didn’t dare to speak a word.

Solemnly, You Miao began, “‘The dragon battles in the wild, its blood the color of the world.’ This is an ominous trigram, so let’s not speak of it today.”

With one sentence, the subject was glossed over. He then glanced at the scroll with “Northern Expedition” written on it and turned back to Tang Bo.

“The Northern Expedition must take place within ten years. Once ten years have passed, any hope for Tianqi to reclaim the north will be lost forever.”

His words immediately caused a sensation among the crowd.

A smile hung from Tang Bo’s lips. No one would ever know whether it was glee at the sight of You Miao delivering himself to his doorstep to be humiliated, or if it was the knowing pleasure of certain victory and a plan to give You Miao a good beatdown.

“My brother, you speak falsehoods!” Tang Bo said. “Surely you must know that a just cause would win an abundance of support, while an unjust cause would find scant support. Jiangnan has been picked clean by war for years; the locals can now barely feed themselves. The northerners don’t till or sow the fields; even if there is a massive influx of silver, what good can mere money do?”

Full of mettle as he spoke, You Miao flicked open the fan in his hand. He gave the people below the stage a long, meaningful look.

"In the sixth month last year, how much did one pound of rice cost? How much did one pound of rapeseed cost? How many able-bodied men did we have? What about this year? A massive amount of silver poured into Jiangnan, which resulted in inflation of the price of rice. Supply couldn't meet demand. It is those who work the land who cannot afford to eat, and those who raise the silkworms who cannot afford to dress!"

Another supervisory secretary named Huang stood up. "Rice doubled in price! Before the new year, Jiangnan assembled a force of one hundred thousand men and sent them to the capital, yet how many returned alive? Three years ago, one hundred thousand bushels of grain was levied from Liu Prefecture to aid the frontlines at Goryeo, but there was nothing but defeat after defeat. The people are tired now. But Lin-xiong still wants the locals to give their all to raise troops for a war that we don't even know we'll win?!"

A different supervisory secretary sneered. "Gongzi, judging by your family background, you are wealthy and powerful and enjoy the refined pastime of cruising on the Yangtze at night, so I imagine you're not lacking in funds."

The crowd below wasn't incensed by these comments, however. They had fallen silent instead.

You Miao, on the other hand, had spaced out staring at the fan in Tang Bo's hand. Upon it was a painting of a tiger roaring in the woods; hand-painted by a famous contemporary artist. He knew Tang Bo's argument wasn't simply his own, that it also embodied the sentiment of the local landed gentry. Furthermore, this was actually a conflict that had been accumulating between the regional territories and the imperial capital for years; it was an age-old issue.

Tang Bo gave a quick cup of his hands and made a "please" hand gesture, motioning for You Miao to share any counter-arguments he might have without holding back.

The scorching sun was shining blinding, brilliant rays down on You Miao. The supervisory secretaries of the Administration Chamber all rose to their feet, and it was playing out like it was many against one. But You Miao only flashed a light, nonchalant smile and cast a look down the stage.

“Qin Shaonan of the Ministry of Revenue,” Qiao Shaonan said as he walked onto the stage.

“Ping Xi of the Ministry of War,” Ping Xi announced.

Lin Luoyang had his hands cupped in a salute. “Lin Luoyang of the Ministry of Personnel.”

The man who brought up the rear also had his hands cupped in a greeting. “Xie Quan of the Ministry of Justice, a citizen of Yi Prefecture.”

The four men entered the ring and stood behind You Miao. Immediately, the stage became a standoff between two factions of young talents. Beneath the sun, You Miao snapped open the folding fan in his hand with a crisp pop.

Match with an adversary face to face and the brave will emerge victorious. An uproar erupted from the crowd below.

You Miao had four ministers supporting him, and with the protection of the God of War Nie Dan, there was practically no one he was afraid of in the world.

He asked coolly, “Ministry of Revenue, Ministry of War, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Personnel. Can any one of my four lords of the ministries answer the question posed by Lord Tang, Master of the Books?”

Qin Shaonan said with a chuckle, “Yang Prefecture alone can feed nearly one and a half million people in a year. The price of rice inflated so rapidly when the northerners came down south was not because there’s an influx of silver; every level of the government practices usury, therefore there is conflict. Does Lord Tang know — of the total land tax collected from all the tenant farmers of Yang Prefecture, when the money reaches the imperial capital, how much is left after it’s passed through the village,

county, and prefectural governments? A new law will be enacted this year to lessen the burden on tenant households; those who work government-owned fields will pay taxes to the country directly. Won't this relieve the heavy agricultural tax? But then…heh."

He trailed off with a chuckle, leaving his words unsaid. But everyone understood.

Never had Tang Bo expected the heads of four ministries would come onto the stage to debate policies against the Administration Chamber. This was clearly supposed to be a civil gathering; the intent was to ask *the people* for their opinions. Yet now, it had become a fight between the power of the Six Ministries and the Administration Chamber—his mind was still slow in processing this.

Ping Xi leisurely added, "You know perfectly well just how many shenanigans went on behind the scenes when one hundred thousand soldiers were drafted the year before. The Due Diligence Army that made it to the capital barely reached forty thousand men, and even that forty thousand were completely new recruits who'd never underwent training; they were sent to the frontlines after merely donning their armor and picking up weapons. Lord Tang, you have been managing the files at the Administration Chamber—have you never seen General Nie's report? Our Tianqi army was defeated because we didn't have adequate food supplies, because our soldiers were weak, and because the various factions within government tied each other up. It's been over a hundred years since the founding of Tianqi, and never before did we reach such peace and prosperity. Yet it is precisely due to this prosperity that the people are richly endowed, and therefore worry more for comfort. If the people do not wish to fight, defeat was inevitable."

Lin Luoyang sighed. "When the country falls—when the nest is upset, no egg is left intact."

"That's right!" You Miao exclaimed angrily. "That is precisely it!"

He took a step forward.

“The founding father of our dynasty built this nation on the back of a horse. The country was then ruled by Emperor Jing and Emperor Wen. Commerce flourished and trade prospered at the northern frontier. All the foreign tribes have had their eyes on our southern commodities.”

You Miao posed a question to the crowd. “Do you know how much profit can be reaped from one trading run in Yanbian City?”

Naturally, no one knew the answer, not even Ping Xi and company. You Miao spun around and shut his fan, and made a hand gesture.

“At least fifty thousand silver!”

He continued, “A wealthy nation must have a strong military. Otherwise, without protection, a wealthy nation is but a slab of fatty meat that lures greedy eyes. No matter how strong Jiangnan is, can it match the strength of the Central Plains? No matter how wealthy Jiangnan is, can it match the wealth of the Central Plains? After a thousand years of building a foundation, the main reason such a great defeat still befell the Central Plains is ‘Life in misery; death in peace’ [22]!”

You Miao snapped open his fan again, flashing the large striking words at Tang Bo. “The northern frontier spans thousands of miles. The wealthier the Han village, the easier they fall prey to Barbarian pillaging. For a long time now, the Hans had been gradually withdrawing from the Lan Pass area, and ever the more every year.

“That is why I said if we do not set out for the northern expedition within ten years, the country will surely fall. Richly-endowed land makes one lose the courage to fight; t’is the fruit of inaction. We have now reached the direst of times. If the remaining armies are depleted without any soldiers to fill the vacancies, and there is no food supply, then it is only a matter of time before the Jiangnan region falls as well. Let me ask everyone here: in another ten years, the last of the seniors will eventually pass away. In another forty years, we who stand here today will have left this world too. Our children and our grandchildren who remain — who among them will remember the humiliation of having two emperors captured? Who will remember that Tianqi once possessed the vast lands in the north?

“The Five Barbarian Tribes fight individually, for themselves only; they aren’t anything to be afraid of. General Nie doesn’t care for any of their tricks — dividing and conquering, surprise attacks, feints, sowing discord, and other such things. Now that the Xianbei Tribe’s forces are gone, the five tribes are now down to four. Their annihilation is just around the corner. But our enemy isn’t the Five Barbarian Tribes — behind their backs are the fifty thousand iron cavalry of the Tartars!

“The Tartars thirst for blood like wolves, and they’ve been watching the fight between the Hans and the Barbarians. Once the timing is right, Hemetir’s iron cavalry will ride south! If we don’t get rid of the Barbarians on the north side as soon as possible, then when the Tartar army comes, you will find yourselves just like the capital…”

You Miao hissed his threat at Tang Bo. “...Regardless of position, regardless of identity, anyone who resists will have their entire clan massacred, and the gentry’s estates will be burned to the ground. Those who surrender will be made slaves, and their wives and daughters raped!”

To conclude, You Miao said, “If my lords do not wish to fight, then please heed the advice of those who have fled from the north: build yourselves a house down south by the sea in Jiao Prefecture, so you’ll have a place to escape to in the future. Otherwise, with us northerners here and the Tartars coming later, the southerners will have nowhere to run but to the sea. Maybe this way, we can all stick it out for a few more days. Heh.”

You Miao shut his fan, turned around, and exited the stage.

The other four smiled and cupped their hands at Tang Bo, who bore a moody expression, then left the stage as well and went their own ways.

Just as You Miao descended the stage, an officer emerged from inside the Administration Chamber and bowed to him. It was needless for the man to make his purpose known; You Miao knew he was being summoned, so he followed him inside through a small side door.

A giant sycamore tree, thick enough that it would take two grown men to encircle its girth, grew in the grounds of the Administration

Chamber. Sure enough, Zhao Chao and Sun Yu were sitting underneath it having tea. The officer stepped away as soon as he brought You Miao here. You Miao smiled as he saw Sun Yu at last.

Tang Bo and another supervisory secretary entered as well. It was the early afternoon and the sun overhead was becoming fierce, so the young people at the debate were breaking for lunch, to resume in the afternoon.

Zhao Chao cast You Miao a glance with a smile in his eyes. You Miao smiled back, but didn't speak. He turned his gaze to Sun Yu.

Sun Yu had become old.

This was You Miao's first time seeing Sun Yu after leaving for the capital the year before. Sun Yu had reached a position where no one was above him but the emperor, and was now wearing official attire. His hair had only been salt and pepper in the past, but now his beard was completely white. His face had freckled with age marks—probably because he never stopped worrying.

You Miao felt his heart clench at the sight, and a lump formed in his throat. Gathering his robe, he knelt down properly and with poise before him.

"Teacher."

Zhao Chao reached out, ready to help You Miao up, but Sun Yu raised a hand to stop him. He turned to You Miao, his tone still laced with the same indifference.

"Teacher? You still have the face to call me teacher?" Sun Yu demanded.

You Miao was taken aback. Before he could react, Sun Yu threw a cup at him, splashing You Miao's face with tea.

Sun Yu scolded furiously, "After you returned to Jiangnan, instead of working for the country, you went back to that estate of yours to be a coward! What face do you have to call me teacher?!"

You Miao instantly understood—Sun Yu was trying to cut down the sharpness of his spirit in front of the juniors from the aristocratic families at the Administration Chamber. Without a choice, he prostrated.

"Sir is correct in his scolding," he said respectfully.

Zhao Chao spoke up with a smile, "Ziqian contributed significant effort while at the estate. He personally joined the Pei County battle, uncaring for his own safety. So, won't Political Advisor Sun…"

Sun Yu's beard twitched, and he said, smiling without mirth, "You Miao, is that all the ambition you've got? Is that all you are capable of?"

You Miao hastily replied, "This student never dared forget the lessons you taught, sir."

"Just as well," Sun Yu said coldly. "Although you are still aimless and full of irresponsible remarks, you did make some good points in your speech out there today; at least you are now someone who has gone beyond the Wall and returned, and has witnessed the country's predicament. Starting today, pack your bags and come to the Administration Chamber."

"I humbly heed teacher's instructions," You Miao replied respectfully.

Sun Yu turned his eyes to the crowd of young people. Before him, Tang Bo and the others looked like mice seeing a cat.

After the group exchanged looks, Tang Bo stepped forward. "To report to Your Majesty and Lord Political Advisor, it is too hot. The debate will proceed as previously arranged after a two-hour intermission."

"Let's have lunch first, then," Zhao Chao instructed, and he and Sun Yu went inside.

Considering an emperor's etiquette, Zhao Chao technically shouldn't be sharing a table with others when taking his meals. Just as Sun Yu was about to withdraw, however, Zhao Chao beckoned him.

“Why don’t we eat at the same table, Lord Political Advisor? There aren’t many who can accompany us during meals now.”

Sun Yu grunted, his face unreadable, but he nodded. The servants set a table. You Miao was still undecided on whether to join, but when he noticed Sun Yu’s back appeared stiff when he rose and walked, he automatically stood behind Sun Yu to serve his meal.

“You Ziqian, why don’t you take a seat too?” Zhao Chao said.

Sun Yu answered languidly, “If Your Majesty doesn’t mind, then let him serve me. I’m a pile of old bones; there isn’t much time left for him to stand behind me.”

Zhao Chao nodded. Sun Yu was indeed an old fox; everything he said held double meaning. You Miao grumbled inwardly. He had studied under Sun Yu for three years, so naturally he was more than familiar with Sun Yu’s habits and preferences when it came to tea and meals. Without much thought, he brought over the tea. After feeling the walls of the cup, he instructed the servants to change it out for another pot of tea.

The rest of the supervisory secretaries were still standing by the door, and Sun Yu dismissed them. “Go and eat. Everything will proceed as normal in the afternoon.”

The crowd dispersed. During the meal, You Miao stood properly and listened from the sidelines. Everything Sun Yu and Zhao Chao discussed were subjects concerning the people’s livelihoods and the new government. Zhao Chao had much to say, whereas Sun Yu simply listened with few replies; at times, he even put down his chopsticks to properly pay attention to what Zhao Chao was trying to express.

“Whether the new law can be enacted will depend on the attitude of the Jiangnan gentry,” Zhao Chao said.

Sun Yu hummed deeply, but he didn’t respond. After a long while, he slowly shook his head.

“What Your Majesty considers and speaks is all good. This old subject raised the same issues many years back at the capital. But when it comes to real action, it is more than difficult.”

The hall was suddenly void of conversation. You Miao took Sun Yu’s empty bowl and refilled the rice, feeling reassured only after Sun Yu finished the second bowl. It would seem this old man could still eat; that meant he could hang on for another three to five years.

What You Miao felt for Sun Yu was true respect and fear, as though You Dechuan wasn’t his real father. Sun Yu’s imposing authority certainly gave off the manners of a strict father. Sun Yu had no children, so if he should go one day, You Miao would definitely cry for the world to hear, dress in mourning clothes, and carry the hearse for ten miles.

“Go. Eat. Lunch.” Sun Yu harshly enunciated every word.

You Miao snapped out of it, knowing he had let his mind wander to who knows where. Sun Yu gave You Miao a confused look.

“What are you doing, holding onto my bowl?” he demanded.

Flustered, You Miao quickly handed Sun Yu his third bowl of rice before he bowed and stepped down. When he left, he could see from the corners of his eye that Zhao Chao was still laughing.

The Administration Chamber had a mess hall inside, and usually, the supervisory secretaries, the functionaries, the government runners, and even the servants who served beverages and handymen who swept the gardens would come here for lunch. You Miao grabbed an empty bowl and saw that the service buckets were all full of light congee and simple dishes. He’d been feeling stuffy with the heat, so having mung bean congee did make him feel better. After downing three bowls of it, he ate another two salted duck eggs. Then a servant brought him sour plum juice. You Miao spied Tang Bo eating by himself near the door, so he brought his bowl over and greeted him.

“Lord Tang, from today onward, we’ll be colleagues.”

Tang Bo flashed him a smile. “Please give me guidance in the future, You-xiong.”

The two cupped their hands in salutation, as if none of the previous incidents had ever happened. You Miao knew that once he entered the Administration Chamber, his days would definitely not be easy—the Administration Chamber was the southerners’ domain from top to bottom. There were a great number of crisscrossing factions among them, but all followed the lead of Tang Bo, who was the most reputable. He also enjoyed favoritism from the great Hanlin academician Li Yan because of family ties.

The Administration Chamber compiled all major matters in the world, and speaking for the people, it presented memorials to the emperor. The Hanlin Academy would draft imperial edicts and preside over the state exams as well as public pronouncements. Sun Yu had gone through a great deal of effort to place him in the Administration Chamber, and after all that had happened today, the young and spirited supervisory secretaries had nothing left to say. As for You Miao, as soon as he entered office, both his position and attitude would forcibly prevent him from ever being able to mingle with the Yang Prefecture youths.

You Miao was slowly coming to understand Sun Yu’s deeper intentions. Had You Miao assumed this position after simply collecting the assignment papers from the Ministry of Personnel, Tang Bo and the others would have surely tried to find a way to rope him over to their side. After all, You Miao was also from the region, locally born and raised in Liu Prefecture. Between the northerner faction led by Li Yan and the others and the southern aristocratic clans, there was a definite possibility of him switching sides after weighing the pros and cons.

Sun Yu had to ensure that the one directing the Administration Chamber in the future was one of Zhao Chao’s men. This way, the northern expedition would not face too much obstruction.

You Miao thought as he ate, feeling completely drained after he had only just returned. Staying at the estate was much more comfortable, after all. He didn’t need to think about anything all day, just eat and sleep, sleep

and eat, and all would be well. He could even work out when there was nothing better to do, or fight some little battles… If things continued on as they were, he would definitely age very quickly. In a few years, he might even end up turning into a little old man himself…

Across from him, Tang Bo also appeared to be laden with thoughts. The two didn't converse and only focused on their lunch.

"Enjoy your meal, You-xiong."

After he finished, Tang Bo stood up. You Miao nodded at the nicety.

However, Tang Bo unexpectedly added, "You-xiong, remember to bring your own bowl tomorrow. The one you're using is my soup bowl. But since you like it so much, you can have it."

Dumbstruck and horribly embarrassed, You Miao looked at the bowl in his hand and then back at Tang Bo. He replied with a stiff smile, "Thanks, Tang-xiong."

[Chapter 43]

That afternoon, the supervisory secretaries went back out to the front of the Administration Chamber to debate policy. You Miao was about to step out as well when a young attendant stopped him.

“Lord Political Advisor requests gongzi’s presence in the inner courtyard.”

Zhao Chao was sitting under the sycamore tree drinking sour plum juice all by his lonesome while he listened to the raging debate outside. No one else was around when You Miao got there.

“How was lunch?” Zhao Chao asked with a smile.

You Miao stuck out his tongue. “I accidentally used Tang Bo’s bowl.”

Super embarrassed, You Miao tugged on Zhao Chao to vent his miseries. Zhao Chao doubled over laughing and then nodded. Feeling better, You Miao crossed the veranda and headed for the inner courtyard to find Sun Yu.

The east wing of the inner courtyard was Sun Yu’s living quarters, while the west wing was where the supervisory secretaries stayed the night when they had to work overtime. Sun Yu used to have a residence in Liu Prefecture, but had been staying at the Yang Prefectural Office since the exodus. Now that he had moved to the Administration Chamber for ease of working, he had no plans to look for anywhere else. Two elderly servants worked at the courtyard just to tend to him; one took care of cooking and the other cleaning.

Knowing Sun Yu had a habit of napping in the afternoon, You Miao didn’t knock on his door and sat obediently outside instead. A short while later, when Changyuan came to ask after him, You Miao instructed him to bring over the tea leaves at home, and to let Li Zhifeng know that he was moving to the Administration Chamber. Later in the afternoon, Changyuan returned to report that the tea and You Miao’s belongings would be delivered in the evening.

After sitting for nearly an hour, a voice from inside the chamber said, “Come in.”

You Miao entered the room and saw the elderly state of Sun Yu — dressed in white, his hair down. He was sitting on the divan waiting to have his hair coiffed, and his exposed arm looked wizened as a withered tree. You Miao felt his heart clench again.

“Sir…” At that moment, You Miao was so filled with emotions that he was at a loss for words.

“I have gotten old.” Sun Yu heaved a long sigh. “Thank goodness you didn’t die beyond the border, or else it would be another tragic case of the white-haired sending off the black-haired.”

The rims of You Miao’s eyes turned red, and he approached to personally coiffe Sun Yu’s hair. He then brought over his outer robe and helped him into it before he knelt and put on his boots. Sun Yu flashed him a meaningful smile.

“Your student knows that this country will never fall with you in Jiangnan, sir,” You Miao said.

Sun Yu responded with a hard snort and scolded, “I would’ve let it go, had you not said anything. I haven’t even admonished you yet. After you returned to Jiangnan, what were you doing, holing up in that estate of yours?!”

You Miao laughed, unable to resist. “Uh…”

Sun Yu was furious. “Who told you to be so cheeky? I didn’t summon you, so you just sat at home? Let me ask you—have you read any books lately?”

You Miao was stumped.

Sun Yu demanded, “How much do you know about the current state of the north?”

I really did let myself slack off, You Miao realized.

Seeing how You Miao had acknowledged his mistake, Sun Yu ended the reprimand. “You’ve only just escaped, so it’s perfectly normal to slack off. All right. Since you know it yourself, I won’t admonish you further.”

“Yes, sir,” You Miao quickly said.

After he helped Sun Yu change into his official attire, he went to brew a pot of tea. He decided after a brief thought not to use the leaves on the shelf, but the new tea from his estate instead.

With a single sip, Sun Yu could tell the difference, and he stole a glance at You Miao.

You Miao was still organizing the shelf, and he said as he placed his own tea leaves into one of the porcelain jars, “I still have some oolong at the estate, I’ll have someone deliver it tomorrow for you, sir.”

“Do as you will. However, the new government has only just been established. Do not be extravagant and wasteful,” Sun Yu replied impassively.

You Miao gave a “mn” in response. He knew Sun Yu could usually withstand worser fare for food, but tea was different—tea was his life. Once everything was in order, You Miao returned to standing beside Sun Yu with his hands down and folded in the front.

After taking a sip of tea, Sun Yu said, “I’m sure you’re aware of the current state of affairs.”

“Yes,” You Miao replied quietly.

“You were friendly with His Highness the Third Prince in the past. And now, you’ve won your bet,” Sun Yu said.

You Miao didn’t dare respond to that statement, knowing Sun Yu had more to add. Sure enough, Sun Yu rose to his feet. He took a few steps and then turned around.

“I won’t ask how much of what you said out there today was genuine and how much of it was a mere front. I only have one thing to ask: when should the northern expedition take place?”

“As soon as possible, sir,” You Miao answered. “Everything I said today was genuine.”

Sun Yu nodded slowly. “The Administration Chamber is the leading center of the country. The northern expedition is no small matter, so you must stand steady. What this old man can do is limited, and when the time is right, it will be much more advantageous for our efforts to reclaim the northern homeland if *you* are the one who steps forward to iron things out.”

You Miao made a noise of acknowledgment.

“There is one other thing, of which I’m sure you are also well aware,” Sun Yu said.

“Please elaborate, sir,” You Miao quickly said.

Sun Yu stared hard at You Miao. “This old man will probably not live to see the day the Central Plains are reclaimed. However, you need to have a plan in mind for whatever the situation the government will be in when that day comes.”

This startled You Miao and forced him to seriously consider the problem Sun Yu had just raised. He was on friendly terms with Zhao Chao, but after winning the war, they would be welcoming back Zhao Mao and Zhao Zhuo, who were imprisoned by the Tartars.

No two suns could rule the sky, and likewise, the people did not have two rulers; the only option for Zhao Chao after the two emperors returned was to abdicate and return the throne to them. But would Zhao Zhuo be wary of Zhao Chao? And with Zhao Chao’s personality, would he even return the throne willingly?

Sun Yu continued languidly, “There is still ample time before that happens, but you must keep that in mind now. Think about it carefully, do

not take any missteps. I won't ask how you plan on handling the problem, but you yourself must know."

You Miao hastily bowed. "Yes, sir. This disciple has duly noted it."

Sun Yu nodded. Then he pointed at the pile of memorials to the throne in the corner, signaling for You Miao to follow him. You Miao picked up the stack of briefs and trailed after Sun Yu, heading to the main hall.

Heaps of documents were piled as high as a mountain there. Sun Yu sat down at the front of the hall.

"You can try to process the memorials by referencing the ones the others have already done. Ask if there is anything you don't understand."

You Miao nodded, then picked up and opened a memorial that hadn't yet been read. Its contents reported on the matter of settling Dong Prefecture's refugees after the war and chaos there.

Tianqi's government affairs were innumerable, not to mention it was the beginning of a new regime. Thus, countless reports from various regions were all handed to the Administration Chamber. There were thousands of matters a day, first filtered through the Six Ministries before reaching the Administration Chamber, at which point the Administration Chamber would filter through them again. Sun Yu controlled this agency, and whatever could be processed by the supervisory secretaries was given to them. The more serious cases were delivered to Zhao Chao to make the final judgment. This way, by the time a memorial to the throne reached Zhao Chao's hands, it would already have a detailed account of the case along with the Administration Chamber's remarks and proposed solutions. Zhao Chao would only need to skim through the file before passing a verdict.

You Miao was at a loss the moment he opened the first book, feeling completely and utterly clueless.

With but a casual glance, Sun Yu could guess You Miao's troubles. "Didn't you hear what I said? Ask if you have questions."

You Miao said, “There are eight thousand, five hundred and forty-one refugees that have come from the warfront at Dong Prefecture currently staying at the Xiao Estate by the river. How should they be settled…?”

Sun Yu replied, “Allocate funds and send prefectural commissioners. Process the memorial and send it to the Ministry of Revenue; have them compile a list of places that can allow for settlements. Prepare the peasants to open up wastelands for farming. A report memorial like this will need to go back and forth at least twice.”

You Miao nodded and happily swept his brush across the book. Then he opened a new memorial.

“...”

“Ask if you don’t know,” Sun Yu said.

The corners of You Miao’s lips twitched. “During the canal construction in Yan County of Jiangnan, Official Xie accepted a bribe of three thousand silver… By law, he must be beheaded…”

Sun Yu grunted. “Rule it yourself.”

“Beheading it is, then,” You Miao happily concluded.

“You dimwit!” Sun Yu’s cry was like a roaring thunder, and You Miao instinctively dodged, afraid Sun Yu was going to aim an inkstone at his head again.

“Are you half asleep or is your stomach still empty?!” Sun Yu demanded.

You Miao immediately replied, “It’s…it’s a joke, sir.”

Sun Yu placed his brush down with a huff. “Explain the situation.”

How rough—You Miao had to tell the whole story from only one memorial. After a brief contemplation, he began, “By law, all those who accept a bribe of over two hundred silver are to be beheaded. The Ministry

of Justice couldn't resolve this case due to someone's plea, so they don't dare to execute Official Xie."

Sun Yu grunted.

You Miao continued, "The man in question is surnamed Xie, so he should be someone from the Jiangnan gentry."

Sun Yu stopped paying attention to You Miao and opened his own memorial to the throne, picking up his brush and dipping it in ink. You Miao continued on his own.

"Three thousand silver; there are reasons for both executing and *not* executing him. Did the ones responsible for the canal construction that year embezzle a lot? But…"

You Miao hummed for a moment then wrote down *"Execute come autumn,"* [23]-shelving the matter for now. You Miao picked up another memorial, and Sun Yu didn't ask how he was doing again. This time, it was the Ministry of War prompting for soldiers' financial reparations.

As dusk neared, the supervisory secretaries returned to the hall. Tang Bo only shot You Miao a quick glance before he bowed.

"Sir."

"Has His Majesty gone back?" Sun Yu asked.

"The stage outside has been put away and His Majesty has returned to the palace," Tang Bo replied, handing Sun Yu a list. "This is the list of names of today's participants. His Majesty has already seen it."

"Summarize everything that was said in the debate today in a clear and concise report," Sun Yu instructed. "Everyone, come in and process the memorials."

Dinner hadn't yet been served, so the supervisory secretaries took their seats. Tang Bo stared at You Miao, and it was then that You Miao realized he had taken over someone else's desk, so he got up. Sun Yu

ordered for a new desk to be brought in and placed on the opposite side, facing Tang Bo's.

"Put it here," Sun Yu said. "Move it up a bit more, pressed on the corner."

The servants did as they were told and put down the desk. Arms full of memorials, You Miao suddenly noticed everyone was staring at his table. Even Tang Bo.

"All right, now sit," Sun Yu said.

This was when You Miao realized—his desk was further to the front than Tang Bo's by *a teeny bit* .

No one spoke inside the hall; the group seemed to harbor some enmity toward the newcomer You Miao, and Tang Bo's face had completely darkened. For a time, everyone was focused on processing the memorials and no one conversed. This lasted until it had become completely dark outside.

Sun Yu closed the memorial before him and asked the group, "What do you all think of the new law?"

The supervisory secretaries began to pack up the scrolls and memorials on their desks.

"Student believes it unfeasible," Tang Bo answered.

"Why is that?" Sun Yu asked.

"When Emperor Wuzong was alive, the whole south resisted the new reforms," Tang Bo said. "Today, even though the new law would reduce taxes and downsize the number of post stations nationwide, it will cause greater poverty. The northerners have come to the south with their money, so why not go with what was previously discussed and sell them the wastelands?"

Huang Xiwen spoke up. "The county selling land to the affluent clans of the north and turning their gold and silver in to the treasury is the

best solution. Why go through the trouble of remeasuring land? Recall how much unclaimed land there was in Pei County!"

"That's feasible for the short term, but not the long term," You Miao spoke up.

It was a heated argument among the supervisory secretaries that You Miao had barged in on, so he immediately became the public target once again. You Miao vaguely recalled that the new law Zhao Chao was about to pass was called the New Land Act.

The New Land Act called for the remeasurement of land for the entire country. The land owned by the Jiangnan gentry wouldn't be touched, but unclaimed wastelands and fertile farmlands left unused for years would be returned to the state. The Ministry of Revenue would then plan as a whole and redistribute land to landless tenant households, which would be directly taxed by the state — contrasting with the current two-tiered collection from both landlord and tenant respectively.

However, excluding the landlords who had gone through formal legal transactions for their properties, the new law meant that much of the land owned by the gentry would be recalculated. None of the clans had a clean founding history; they had all claimed some form of government land, and there was an immense amount of technically unowned land that landlords had taken over when the previous farmers moved out due to their inability to continue working. Zhao Chao's actions would inevitably violate the interests of a great number of the gentry.

"Every time Tianqi dispatches armies, it has a hard time looking after its head and tail," You Miao stated. "The largest insufficiency in the battle against Goryeo three years ago, as well as the resistance against the Tartars last year, was food provisions. The fight over land has been an ongoing issue that existed since Emperor Wuzong's time. I still stand by what I said. In order to set off a northern expedition, we can't hold back even if it hurts; everyone has to make at least some concessions."

Tang Bo flashed a smile and questioned him like someone uninvolved. "I hear the You family has two estates. If His Majesty asserts

the new law and demands that you distribute half of your estate to the farmers, would you do it?”

You Miao responded with a cool smile and asked back, “What does Tang-xiong think? Do you guys think I’d do it?”

Tang Bo was not expecting this answer from You Miao. With a chuckle, You Miao said, “Four years ago, when His Majesty was still the Third Prince, he went to war in Goryeo and requisitioned food provisions. My Riverwave Estate donated one hundred thousand pounds of grain.”

Tang Bo snorted, then turned to Sun Yu. “Sir, this action is unusually complex. It requires land remeasurement — based on the number of labor hands available at the Ministry of Public Works, I’m afraid it will take more than just a few months to calculate everything. Besides, the autumn harvest is fast approaching. Some pieces of land will cause another large-scale migration if they’re taken back.”

“Just have the ones who’ve worked the land for a long time sign a new contract with the state instead of the landlord and it’ll be fine,” You Miao said.

“But how would you monitor them?” questioned another supervisory secretary, whose name was Yan Lin. “There are too many loopholes to exploit if someone wants to use this opportunity to seek personal gain.”

Tang Bo said bluntly, “You Ziqian, I know you place the country first in everything, but not everything is so simple and easy. Once the new law is carried out, it will be met with resistance from every level. And if the orders from above cannot reach the bottom, it will cause nothing but more unnecessary trouble.”

“Find a place to use as a test spot,” You Miao said. “Don’t enforce the new law completely and implement it all at once; find a place to try it out first.”

“Then should we count your Riverwave Estate in?” another person said.

The group all started to laugh.

Sun Yu gave a hard harrumph, looking displeased. Only then did the young men realize that they had overdid it in targeting You Miao. They all shut up, afraid Sun Yu was angered.

You Miao, however, only chuckled. “If His Majesty finds it agreeable, I’m okay with having my estate be the testing ground.”

That was actually a joke. After all, his estate had been purchased by his late mother with real money, so no actual testing would land on his head. Only the Quan Mountain area was at risk of being consolidated, but he hadn’t claimed that piece of land for long; if Zhao Chao had a need for it, You Miao probably would have no choice but to hand it over.

In contrast, most of the families of the employees in the Administration Chamber had overtaken quite a lot of land. The local governments didn’t investigate the ownership of those lands not solely out of consideration for the families’ honor, but also because they simply didn’t know about some of it. Such was You Dechuan’s case — at first, he had only purchased the plot where Sunshower Tea Estate was situated. But because no one lived or farmed in the back mountains, he gradually claimed more and more of its land. If Pei County’s Magistrate came knocking, You Dechuan could easily send him off with some cash.

Regional governments colluding with landlords was the norm everywhere. But if the imperial government decreed a thorough investigation, then things may become complicated. In Emperor Wuzong’s era, there was an attempt at reform once, but it was met with resistance from almost all the aristocratic clans. In the end, the matter concluded with the exile of the official who’d drafted the law.

You Miao learned that Hanlin Academy was the first to propose this new law, which Zhao Chao approved as soon as he was informed of it. But the real impetus behind it must have been Sun Yu. Sun Yu had already loosened up considerably when it came to policies, keeping one eye shut. His intention wasn’t to rob the land the gentry had claimed, but to ensure there was land to farm for most of the northerners who had fled south.

Still impassive, Sun Yu said, “Everyone dismissed. Go take your meals now.”

“The land issue could’ve been overlooked had it been any other time,” You Miao suddenly spoke up. “But at a time like this, reform is necessary.”

Everyone was already taking their leave, but when You Miao spoke, he forced all the supervisory secretaries to stay where they were. Sun Yu wasn’t in a hurry to stand, either, and only gazed at You Miao as he softly stroked his beard.

“There are only two great enemies a country can face,” You Miao said solemnly. “External woes and internal troubles. In the founding father’s reign, everyone had a plot of land to work, every household had a surplus of grain. The country had only just been established, and everything was going smoothly. The discrepancy between the poor and the rich wasn’t that obvious. But within the span of a hundred years, the majority of laborers lost their land from disasters like droughts and floods; every change and tax increase made the poor poorer. Not even farming could help them survive, so most of them had no choice but to sell and leave their own land.

“Last year saw a great flood, and a great flood is always followed by a great drought. If the issue isn’t resolved in time, then I’m afraid with the increase of refugees in Jiangnan, imminent civil unrest is certain.”

Tang Bo and the others all stared at You Miao. You Miao knew Sun Yu was also hesitant, perhaps because he didn’t have enough power to support him. If the reform was rashly implemented, history would very likely repeat itself. But this was one point that Sun Yu had to support, or else when the time came to levy grain, the regional major clans would join together to refuse to pay military provisions.

Requisitioning directly from the tenant farmers to build up ration supply would be much easier than requisitioning from the gentry. All else aside, even if it was a simple purchase of grain and the governments sent an official with the money to buy from a major house like the Tang family,

what could the official do if the other blocked him with an excuse like, *"Oh, sorry, harvest was bad this year, we can barely feed ourselves."* ?

Hoarding and refusal to sell grain in order to inflate prices was a common trick landlords used. *This* was the root of the rapid inflation problem.

"Reform implementation will not be easily enforced at the bottom level," You Miao said. "Just as Lord Tang has said, I'm also aware of the difficulties the new law will face. But when it comes to the levy and purchase of grain, the same requisition orders also don't reach the bottom level, allowing the middleman officials to stuff their personal wallets instead. This is why the reform can only be carried out by force. Be pliable yet strong; by being both forceful and amenable, the end result will be better than continuing with the old system."

Neither party spoke.

A moment later, Tang Bo said, "I will stand by what I said. How much of the new law can you push through? Just in Yang Prefecture alone, you won't be able to handle the landed gentry—"

"We'll push through as much as we can, whatever counts," You Miao said patiently. "Starting with the test grounds first. The new law is unavoidable, at least in the years that we will be preparing for the northern expedition. It has to be this way. Once the reform succeeds in one area, it can be gradually carried out throughout the entire south."

Tang Bo and the others regarded You Miao with disdain. When Sun Yu saw that no one had any more to add, he said, "Dinner time."

The supervisory secretaries all stood up; some were going home, while others remained there. You Miao walked out of the hall and stretched. Just when he was about to simply plop down on the ground, however, he stumbled, his legs numb from all the sitting he did today. When he reached the door, he spotted someone drinking tea outside. It was Li Zhifeng.

You Miao was pleasantly surprised. "Why are you here?"

Li Zhifeng stood up. “To pick you up. Did you eat yet?”

You Miao was covered in sweat, sticky and gross, from having baked under the sun for half the day and using his brain for the entire afternoon. “Come in and sit for a bit. I might have to stay an extra few days here at the Administration Chamber.”

Li Zhifeng followed You Miao inside. They ran into Sun Yu on the way, who was talking in the corridor. Li Zhifeng and Sun Yu had met before, so they nodded at each other in greeting. Some of the supervisory secretaries had returned to their boarding rooms, while some were packing up to leave. No one knew who Li Zhifeng was when they saw him.

“Let’s eat.” You Miao took Li Zhifeng to the mess hall. “They take care of meals here. Ah, I forgot to buy a bowl…”

Li Zhifeng opened his sack and took out a shimmering gold bowl. “This is from Lao-San.”

You Miao had only just told Zhao Chao about the bowl incident at lunch, but Zhao Chao had already gone and royally granted him one?! The bowl was rather heavy, but it was not made of pure gold, so it was probably gilded. Li Zhifeng dug out another bowl that was ceramic.

“I bought you another one. Are the meals free?”

“Mn. Eat to your heart’s content,” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng went to the service table and filled You Miao’s bowl with rice first. The dishes were already set out. Tang Bo and some of the others had already gone home, but there were a few supervisory secretaries around to eat dinner. You Miao and Li Zhifeng sat facing each other. Li Zhifeng used the ceramic bowl while You Miao checked the bottom of his, curious to see if anything was written on this golden bowl Zhao Chao had given him. Sure enough, it was engraved with: “Royally Granted by the Son of Heaven.”

“Using a golden bowl, [24] are you, You Ziqian?” someone teased.

You Miao answered with a smile, “Yeah. His Majesty awarded it to me.”

Everyone was rendered speechless. Not bothering to be polite with them either, You Miao focused on wolfing down his meal with Li Zhifeng. You Miao was a pampered and spoiled boy who had been super fussy with his meals growing up — if his rice had husks, the entire bowl would be changed out. He wouldn’t touch steamed eggs that weren’t tender, fish that had bones, or meat that was braised too soft or too tough. He would refuse a single bite if the dish was too salty or bland. Since his return from the north, however, he stopped caring for the particulars and would eat anything.

The civil scholars were all alarmed by the way he ate when he first dug in. As Li Zhifeng joined him, the people were silenced and only gawked at the pair.

Li Zhifeng’s bowl of rice was stacked high with meat and vegetables, and he finished it all. Then he refilled the bowl. He did this twice. You Miao finished a good portion of his meal, and whatever was left over was shoved into Li Zhifeng’s bowl. Li Zhifeng polished it off, then went for another refill. It took another four refills before he stopped.

The onlookers watched with their chopsticks frozen in hand, their faces twitching.

While Li Zhifeng went to do the dishes, You Miao pulled two chairs to the yard and sat, belting a satisfied burp.

“The estate does it better,” he remarked.

“Have Mrs. Qian come cook for you?” Li Zhifeng came over after he placed the washed bowls in the drying rack.

“No, don’t, I’ll just live like this for the time being,” You Miao quickly said.

“Lord Uncle wants to send servants to tend to you, but doesn’t know how many are permitted to come,” Li Zhifeng said, sitting down.

You Miao jolted in alarm. “I’m under my teacher’s watch, don’t let anyone come.”

“You don’t even know how to wash clothes. How will you live without anyone taking care of you?” Li Zhifeng pointed out.

You Miao pondered for a moment. “Then pick a quiet one to come and he can sleep in my room.”

Li Zhifeng nodded. Just the thought of this made You Miao’s head throb. One did not enter the Administration Chamber without some kind of status; everyone here was more prominent than the other, each wealthier than the next. Showing pomp was only going to make people laugh. No doubt this bunch was also afraid of Sun Yu, so no one dared to step a toe out of line.

“Let’s go.” Li Zhifeng suddenly stood up.

“Where to?” You Miao asked.

“Bath,” Li Zhifeng replied.

You Miao had been feeling uncomfortable, being all sticky and gross as he was, so he followed Li Zhifeng out. Li Zhifeng led him through the small alleyways, winding this way and that, and once they emerged, they hopped onto a horse. It was finally cooler at night; the city was alight, and the night breeze felt indescribably refreshing.

Although Maocheng wasn’t as bustling as Yang Prefectural City, new houses were everywhere, exuding the air of a new place to call home. You Miao knew Qiao Jue was already making arrangements to set up a residence for him in this city, so he and Li Zhifeng strolled everywhere to scope things out. Afterward, the two went to the army barracks. The place where Li Zhifeng stayed just so happened to be connected to an underground pipe.

Li Zhifeng drew the water, so You Miao took a quick bath at the barracks. Dressed in snow-white inner robes, they rode the horse out. There

was something refreshingly comfy about rubbing skin against skin in the cool of the night.

That night, after preparing the bed for You Miao, Li Zhifeng went to sleep holding him. The next day, Li Zhifeng went out and brought back breakfast while You Miao was still sleeping. Qiao Jue had sent You Miao the quietest boy servant from the estate, Mu Feng, and he had been waiting in the yard since early morning.

Although the new scenery was foreign, it wasn't as if You Miao couldn't get used to it. After all, his experiences in Da'an were deeply etched in his mind; after returning to Jiangnan, anywhere was good in comparison. While washing up, he noticed that every supervisory secretary living at the Administration Chamber had a boy servant waiting on them.

So it's not anything strange, huh? Whew, You Miao thought. After asking around, he learned that Sun Yu permitted everyone to bring one personal servant, and You Miao relaxed at last.

Sun Yu returned from the morning assembly, but the one following behind him was Tang Bo. As days passed, You Miao gradually became accustomed to the rules and schedule at the Administration Chamber. Every morning, everyone attended the morning lesson. A library connected the backs of both the Administration Chamber and the Hanlin Academy, and it housed the books brought from the Central Plains. Innumerous local Jiangnan classics were also included in the collection, many of which were rare editions.

The morning lesson was basically self-study. Sun Yu didn't remind anyone, but everyone was very self-aware. After all, they were all grownups; even slacking off was their own business. It was the first time You Miao had entered such an environment. Since everyone around him was studying hard, he had to calm his mind as well to join them.

The end of the morning lesson coincided with Sun Yu's return from the morning assembly, at which point the mess hall would open for breakfast. After breakfast, whether or not Sun Yu had actually returned on time, the young supervisory secretaries would enter the main hall to process

the day's memorials to the throne. Each person to a table; the urgent reports from the Six Ministries and the prefectures would start rolling in endlessly at the crack of dawn.

Sun Yu would take an hour nap at noon, but in the afternoon, he was always present to supervise the group.

In the evening, when work let out, You Miao usually went to find Li Zhifeng. However, Sun Yu had issued the order that You Miao and Tang Bo had to take turns to stay behind. When night fell, they had to organize the memorials to the throne for Sun Yu to prepare for the morning assembly the next day.

The weather was hot like fire; time flew after Zhao Chao ascended the throne, and three months passed in the blink of an eye. You Miao was practically suffocated by all sorts of political matters. Meanwhile, Li Zhifeng had been training the soldiers every day, and every time he left the city, it would be at least three to five days before he returned. But whenever he came back, he would always come see You Miao first thing regardless of whether his plate was full.

One night, Li Zhifeng had gone for training again, and You Miao was staying behind to help Sun Yu put together the memorials. Sun Yu let out a sigh.

Under the dim light, Sun Yu appeared even older. The sight made You Miao sad — the old man was ambitious in his youth and devoted his entire life to Tianqi, but he was never treated fairly. He was even exiled to Jiangnan by Zhao Mao. Now that the country was in dire straits, it was his old back that was holding up the government.

"Sir, we mustn't act with undue haste." You Miao knew that Sun Yu was drained in body and mind today thanks to the new law's failure to be implemented, hence the sigh.

With red-rimmed eyes, Sun Yu gave You Miao a rare look.

"You say I am like this because of the new law? Sun Yu mumbled. "No. I am afraid that I don't have many days left to live, yet there is no one

to take over…"

Tears streamed down Sun Yu's eyes for some reason, and he heaved another long sigh. When he exited the study, his figure was hunched and looked nothing like he usually did. You Miao stood there, dumbfounded. It was a while before he finally understood what Sun Yu meant.

Li Zhifeng happened to return that day, and when he noticed You Miao feeling down, he asked, "Got scolded?"

Slumped in Li Zhifeng's arms, You Miao replied, "Yeah. My teacher said I'm too lazy."

Indeed, You Miao finally sensed that he was still too indolent. He certainly was much busier compared to before, but in Sun Yu's eyes, it was still not enough…far from it. He hadn't grown to the point where Sun Yu could pass him the Administration Chamber without worry.

"I've disappointed my teacher," You Miao said glumly, and told Li Zhifeng the whole story. At the end, Li Zhifeng petted his head.

"Then stop working and go home."

Stop working and go home, stop working and go home, stop working and go home, stop working and go home… You Miao found he couldn't explain himself to Li Zhifeng at all. Exasperated, he sat there like a fool, snickering with a horrible expression.

Li Zhifeng was baffled. "What?"

You Miao burst out laughing, thinking Li Zhifeng's response was too funny. Li Zhifeng was speechless now, so he just sat there. A moment later, You Miao's entire person felt uplifted.

"Got over it?" Li Zhifeng asked.

"Yeah. Let's go take a bath," You Miao said.

The two headed for the barracks again and stripped nude at the bath. This courtyard was reserved for Li Zhifeng, so there was no need to

worry about anyone intruding. Li Zhifeng lathered You Miao with soap, then they clung to one another, nuzzling and biting. Unable to take it any longer, Li Zhifeng held You Miao and positioned him with one foot on the faucet. Then he soaped up his hardness and pushed in, thrusting in and out until You Miao felt so good he begged for mercy.

A long while later, after Li Zhifeng had come once and then taken care of him as well, You Miao was snuggled against Li Zhifeng.

"I want to keep doing it," You Miao whispered.

"Right now?" Li Zhifeng asked.

Laughing, You Miao clarified, "I meant the Administration Chamber."

Li Zhifeng nodded in understanding. "Understood. You know best."

You Miao finally figured out why he'd been feeling depressed lately—he was sexually frustrated, at the root of it. Done washing, they stepped out with their hair half-wet. Li Zhifeng was carrying You Miao's outer clothes. They were wearing long inner robes, and You Miao had nothing on underneath. The rough texture of the robe rubbed against his bare skin with every evening breeze that passed by, and it was getting him worked up. Stealing a glance at Li Zhifeng, he saw his face was flushed. He was clearly thinking about the same thing.

"Not much rain lately," You Miao started. "The Autumn harvest is gonna be a headache… Has the rice been planted yet?"

Li Zhifeng nodded. "The river's water level is down, but things are still business as usual at the estate."

You Miao had a feeling there was going to be a drought this year.

Wearing wooden clogs, they click-clacked their way down the stone-paved streets. As they left the vibrant main street, Li Zhifeng said, "I have to go to the palace for a meeting tonight. Da-ge is back."

You Miao said straightaway, "I'll go too."

“The Ministry of War just delivered their memorial to the throne to the Administration Chamber. If you’re attending court tomorrow, you can see him then,” Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao remembered now; he could indeed just attend the morning assembly tomorrow. Li Zhifeng walked him to the alley behind the Administration Chamber, and You Miao reached out to wrap his arms around Li Zhifeng’s neck, which still smelled clean and fresh. They locked lips again, their tongues intertwining. You Miao was completely naked under the robe, and as he embraced Li Zhifeng, neither of them could hold back the burning desire within.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder… It had been a long time since You Miao last felt like this. Li Zhifeng had been occupied with military affairs and was spending more and more time out of the city, while You Miao was working his butt off; one person doing the work of two. He’d been so busy he hadn’t the time to think about him, but as he lay in bed every night waiting to fall asleep, his always found himself missing him.

Reflecting on it, they had known each other for four years now.

Li Zhifeng’s breaths came out scalding-hot as he kissed along You Miao’s neck and sucked on his lip.

You Miao whispered by his ear, “I missed you so much…”

“Me too.”

Li Zhifeng swallowed with some difficulty as he pressed You Miao against the wall. You Miao tensed up immediately. He and Li Zhifeng had acted like an old married couple for the last few years, but the desire hadn’t cooled; Li Zhifeng had only gotten more fiery and passionate. Li Zhifeng had *just* fucked him by the faucet while they were bathing earlier, and he already wanted to go again. Bearing with the pain, You Miao bit down on Li Zhifeng’s ear.

“Gen…gentler!” You Miao hissed.

Li Zhifeng's next thrust was indeed much gentler, but You Miao was anxious—it might be late at night, but they were still doing it in a back alley! He didn't know what he'd do if someone were to walk by and see… but he also could not deny the peculiar thrill he felt, here in this secluded place.

Standing face to face, Li Zhifeng held up You Miao's leg with one hand and fucked into him just like that, their private parts covered by the robes they wore. It was a bit uncomfortable for You Miao, and he pinched Li Zhifeng's ear to whisper, "Are you trying to get back everything I've owed for the past few days or what…?"

"Fuck it back, more like," Li Zhifeng answered in a whisper, then drove in deep.

You Miao nearly cried out, only to have his lips firmly sealed by Li Zhifeng. The cry in his throat turned into a soft moan between them instead. You Miao was already crying a little, but Li Zhifeng only continued to fuck all the way in and then out, pressing gently in with that sizable cock of his, rubbing up against that spot inside of You Miao with every stroke. You Miao clung to him for dear life as Li Zhifeng fucked him without pause, like a wild dog in rut in the depths of the night.

Getting fucked into over and over like that, with his lips sealed by Li Zhifeng, You Miao felt like he was drowning in pleasure and apprehension both. It didn't take even a quarter of an hour before You Miao's entire body tensed, and a slick wetness slid down his thigh.

Holding him in his arms, Li Zhifeng continued to thrust into You Miao in a wild burst of energy before exhaling a long sigh and pulling back. He watched his face quietly as he did so, then planted a soft kiss on his lips.

"I'm off."

Li Zhifeng straightened out his robe and turned to leave. In the distance, the night watch could be heard coming this way.

"Bastard." As he supported himself against the wall and staggered inside, You Miao thought Li Zhifeng was becoming more and more

outrageous these days.

Li Zhifeng piped up again, “Ministry of War, memorials.”

Recalling the business he had to take care of, You Miao nodded and whirled inside. Sun Yu was already asleep, while Tang Bo was still working at the table by the candlelight. Both them were caught by surprise when You Miao stepped into the hall.

“Lord Tang.”

You Miao hurriedly closed and straightened the robe around himself, feeling the distinct wetness of his own cum on the lower part of his belly. Thank goodness Tang Bo only gave a noncommittal “mn” and didn’t pay him any close attention, because You Miao was still breathing a little fast. As he walked into the hall, he could feel Li Zhifeng’s cum sliding down his leg.

Flushed and a little flustered, You Miao hastily sat down, his heart beating fast and his mind distracted. Li Zhifeng had acted like a horn-dog toward him, but it’d just brought out his slutty side. it made him want to stick and cling to him, get slapped around a bit, called some names…

You Miao swallowed and wiped his leg off with his robe. His ankles and naked legs could be seen below the robe, and with Tang Bo sitting right across from him, it didn’t feel right however he tried to sit. In the end, he settled on simply sitting cross-legged on the chair and let the robe drape to cover himself.

You Miao was different from those gentle and sweet-tempered little boy toys; he had practiced martial arts with Li Zhifeng for years, so he actually looked more like the boy servants at home, with strong and powerful arms and legs. He had slacked off on training after returning to Jiangnan, but the foundation was still there. Tang Bo couldn’t help but steal a few more looks, grumbling to himself inwardly.

“Lord You isn’t married yet?” Tang Bo asked casually.

“Wh…what?”

You Miao unconsciously felt awkward, thinking Tang Bo had nailed what was on his mind. He wondered if Tang Bo had heard what he and Li Zhifeng were just doing outside. But the main hall and the back door were so far away from each other, he shouldn't have heard anything…

"Not yet," You Miao replied after snapping back to reality.

Tang Bo gave a light smile. "I wonder which miss will have the honor."

You Miao responded with a dry chuckle. "I've never heard Tang-xiong mention anything. Is Tang-xiong married?"

"Yes," Tang Bo said. "I've a daughter at home. My little girl is six this year."

You Miao nodded, inwardly amazed that Tang Bo was actually a father. But on second thought, it was pretty normal — members of gentry families married at the age of sixteen, so at twenty-two with a six-year-old daughter… It was actually You Miao who didn't appear normal.

"Did the Ministry of War send over the memorials?" You Miao asked.

"Minister Ping brought them over personally," Tang Bo said. "They're on teacher's desk, to be discussed at tomorrow's morning assembly."

You Miao remembered just then that the one on duty to attend court with Sun Yu the next day was Tang Bo; his turn would be the day after. Thus, he asked, "What memorial is Lord Tang looking at?"

"Drought report," Tang Bo's reply was succinct.

You Miao got up and flipped through the memorials on Sun Yu's desk. Tang Bo side-eyed him. He had now seen the trace of wetness on You Miao's lower leg and ankle, but he didn't comment.

"Is the drought serious?" You Miao asked.

“It hasn’t rained a single drop in two months, what do you think?” Tang Bo replied.

You Miao had actually forgotten about that, not having gone out in ages. Mu Feng hadn’t mentioned it, either. But Riverwave Estate had a waterwheel and canals, so the drought wouldn’t affect his own land. Still, whenever there was a dry spell, there was always the fear that it could turn into a disaster. If this continued, the Autumn harvest was going to have trouble. And if the Autumn harvest was met with difficulties…the result was too dreadful to think about. They could only pray for the blessings of Heaven…

“What does that report say?” Tang Bo asked, seeing You Miao examining the memorial in his hand under the lamplight.

Ever since that victorious battle back in the fifth month, the Xianbei army had completely collapsed. The Tartars had thus moved southward via the north road and occupied Hupao River north of Pei County, as well as the plains of the Dong River. As a response, Nie Dan had led the force to the latter river’s south shore.

Dong River was home to an ancient, thousand-year-old battleground. Ten thousand of the Tartar vanguard had come in these past days, their scouting hawks circling the skies day and night. This made everyone at court anxious at first, and eager to increase defense. However, Sun Yu gave one penetrating remark and told Nie Dan to hold his troops and bide his time: at a time like this, the vanguard might not be waiting for the main force. Instead, Hemetir could be in the middle of negotiations with the Five Barbarian Tribes—the Barbarians very likely had internal issues to deal with.

Sure enough, Nie Dan withheld the army for half a month and there was still no sign of the Tartar army bearing down on the border.

You Miao looked up at Tang Bo. “For tomorrow’s morning assembly, can Tang-xiong switch with me?”

Appearing as though he already knew You Miao was going to ask this, Tang Bo replied nonchalantly, “Up to you.”

You Miao nodded. Almost every military matter that had come to the Administration Chamber had gone through his hands; only when it was an issue he couldn’t resolve would it be passed to Sun Yu. After all, none of the supervisory secretaries were familiar with fighting a war. Only Tang Bo could express an opinion once in a while. Since Nie Dan had returned, it had to be You Miao who attended the morning assembly the next day.

You Miao studied the memorial carefully. Nie Dan’s request was to increase his army by ten thousand men. He wanted to use ten thousand cavalry and five thousand infantry to strike the ten thousand-strong Tartar vanguard camp, and hoped to utterly annihilate them at Dong River.

It took no brains to guess what things would be like at tomorrow’s morning assembly. All the ministers would definitely attack Nie Dan in an attempt to force him to abandon this insane proposal. Proactively strike at the Tartars? Preposterous! And “utterly annihilate,” too?! Completely mad! If they annihilated the enemy force right when Hemetir was coming south, a crazed act of revenge was certain.

But You Miao knew that Nie Dan was one hundred percent confident in his plan, and at a time like this, even Sun Yu harbored mixed feelings and could not arrive at a decision. As long as You Miao could make clear the pros and cons at the morning assembly tomorrow, and manage to convince the court to send reinforcements, then fighting this battle would actually be feasible. Maybe with Nie Dan and Li Zhifeng in command, the entire Dong River area could be seized. Once Dong River was breached, the entirety of Liu Prefecture would be recovered, after which moving the force north to Su Prefecture would only be a matter of time.

However, as much as the battle was feasible, the aftermath was what would be difficult to determine… One slip, and they would inevitably face a massive counterattack from the Tartar army.

[Chapter 44]

You Miao tossed and turned the entire night. Nothing but strange dreams haunted him, the restlessness rendering him basically half asleep the whole time. He dreamed that Li Zhifeng was going to leave him and return to Quanrong. Then he dreamed that Zhao Chao was killed, and rivers of blood flowed everywhere. When he woke the next day, he was so disoriented that he had no idea at all how he made it to the imperial court.

The crooked, god-forsaken heavens had made the weather today utterly abnormal, and the entire imperial city was stuffy as a giant steamed pot. You Miao's sweat-soaked undershirt was clinging onto his body, and he was forced to wear another layer on top with the official uniform. He was thoroughly sodden. Dizzy and muddled, he listened to Nie Dan at court, who was arguing so hard with the ministers that he was red in the face. Meanwhile, face pale because of the heat, Zhao Chao sat on the throne, clearly distracted by something else on his mind.

"Your Majesty!" Nie Dan had had enough. "If we don't dispatch the troops now, we'll miss a good opportunity for no reason!

"General Nie!" Huang Tong, the Censor-in-Chief, stepped forward to contend with Nie Dan. "Even if we reclaim Dong River right now, what army will you have to defend against the Tartars if they close in on us again?"

"The terrain of the Dong River plains is flat, feasible for meeting battles," Nie Dan said. "I and Li Zhifeng will command the army of twenty thousand and build the garrison along Dong River. If we move forward, we can take the lands north of Su Prefecture, Yu Prefecture, and other regions in the area; if we retreat, we can defend the natural barrier that is the Yangtze River. What is there to be afraid of?!"

"We don't care how the aftermath is handled," Li Zhifeng added impassively, "we only handle the fighting. After the fighting is over, it's *your* jobs to figure out whether we'll negotiate peace. Otherwise, what do we need civil officials for?"

His words caused a great commotion among the officials, military and civil alike, and You Miao found it hilarious. Li Zhifeng very rarely attended court, and every time he did, he merely stood at the end of the military row without saying a word. Who would've thought he'd say something like that today?

"Your Majesty." Huang Tong took another step forward and bowed. "We must not act rashly. It hasn't rained since the fifth month. If we set out to fight the Tartars but fail to end it quickly, the delay can give rise to changes to the situation."

Zhao Chao looked at Sun Yu, and Sun Yu sighed but didn't say anything. Zhao Chao then looked at You Miao. Nie Dan's brows were deeply furrowed, and for the moment, no one at court spoke.

"The Tartars will not counterattack," You Miao suddenly spoke up.

Sun Yu looked at You Miao, a little surprised, then he narrowed his eyes and gave an imperceptible shake of his head. He was warning You Miao that he would be speaking as a representative of the Administration Chamber if he offered Zhao Chao advice right now. You Miao knew what he was doing, so he nodded his head in response.

"Why do you say that?" Zhao Chao questioned You Miao, but his eyes were on Sun Yu. Sun Yu closed his eyes, appearing as if he was resting while he sat there in the seat imperially granted to senior statesmen.

You Miao knew Sun Yu's gesture meant a tacit consent, allowing him to provide direct advice to the emperor without consulting him first. Thus, he dropped his worries and spoke directly to the ministers present.

"Let's all take a look at the map first."

The inner palace attendants brought out the map and spread it open. It displayed the southern prefectures, such as Liu and Su, as well as the Barbarian land division.

"The Five Barbarian Tribes have long since been at odds with each other," You Miao said. "The tribes check and balance each other, forming a

situation where they are both resisting and cooperating with the Tartars."

No one spoke; all eyes were on You Miao.

He continued, "The Xianbei tribe fell in the battle at Pei County back in the fifth month. The force of the Barbarian tribes was severely damaged, and the other four armies must also now understand the truth—invading the Central Plains is easy, but under circumstances where we are prepared, it will be very difficult to cross the Yangtze."

Nie Dan cut in. "And the truth is, the Barbarians have never before entered the Central Plains. Their combat strength is, in reality, nothing to be afraid of. The Tartars are the real tough ones."

"Right," You Miao said. "Presently, the Di and the Hun have occupied the areas north of Liu and Su Prefectures. The Tartars have sent forth vanguards, but the main army still hasn't moved all this time. Hemetir stationed his army here. My lords, what do you think he is doing?"

After posing the question, You Miao scanned across all the ministers in the room, noticing that some understood what he was getting at and some didn't. People like the Censor-in-Chief and the Hanlin Academicians, they had no clue. However, Li Zhifeng, Zhao Chao, Nie Dan…even Li Yan knew the answer. Except no one said anything.

"He is negotiating with the Huns," Li Yan said, at last.

"Exactly," You Miao said.

"That's only speculation," Zhao Chao said. "We don't have enough information. No one knows if the situation is as General Nie analyzed."

"You're gonna have to take a gamble on this, Your Majesty," You Miao replied. "It's never a sure thing when it comes to the destiny of a nation. Over-cautiousness and indecision will only make us lose out on opportunities."

Zhao Chao's face fell, but You Miao continued on bluntly, "If the situation really is as we've speculated, then Hemetir wants to form a new

alliance with the Huns. They'll utilize the internal turmoil within the Five Barbarian Tribes after the Xianbei's fall to unify *all* the tribes beyond the border. He'll have a lot on his plate.

"If!" You Miao exclaimed emphatically. "If, while Hemetir is in negotiations, his main army suffers complete annihilation from our sudden attack—what would the Huns think, first of all?"

You Miao added, "Next, what would Hemetir do?"

The hall fell silent again. You Miao nodded toward Sun Yu and returned to his spot. He knew that there was no need to finish his statement; all he needed was to let the crowd come to their own conclusions—without a doubt, the Hun's reaction would be to laugh at and desert Hemetir, scrapping their alliance forever. As for Hemetir, he would go northward in rage, assemble his forces, and attack Jiangnan.

However, the north of the Yangtze was the Barbarians' territory. If Hemetir wanted to cross the Central Plains to fight this war, then he had to form an alliance with the remaining four great Barbarian tribes, which brought them back to the first problem. Hemetir's army couldn't come south after all.

The Han sneak attack that had upset the delicate balance between the Five Barbarian Tribes and the Tartars was part of a linked scheme Sun Yu had set up before Nie Dan struck the Xianbei at Pei County.

"Assembly dismissed for today." Zhao Chao seemed somewhat irritated. "We'll discuss this again tomorrow."

Nie Dan blew his top. "Your Majesty! This can't drag on any longer! Why are you being this indecisive?!"

" *Assembly dismissed* !" Zhao Chao barked, also furious now.

Expression grim, Nie Dan turned and left the palace, the heavy gloom of the air carrying the oppressive sound of his retreating steps.

After Zhao Chao left court, the ministers also took their leave one after other. The sky was gloomy, and so stuffy it was making You Miao irritated. But the stormy clouds foretold one thing: it was about to rain. At least the great drought would be ending.

You Miao stood outside Wumen Gate to wait for Li Zhifeng, but it took some time before he showed up.

Li Zhifeng asked You Miao when he found him, "Why won't he give the dispatch orders? Da-ge's prepared already."

You Miao shushed and tugged at him, and the two left Wumen Gate. While You Miao whispered to Li Zhifeng, however, he noticed Li Yan watching him from afar with a meaningful gaze and a complicated expression.

"It's too soon to dispatch the army right now," You Miao said. "Didn't you see? Not even my teacher said anything. Normally, it should've been him who talks to the emperor. But he didn't say anything, which means he doesn't approve of the timing."

Li Zhifeng frowned. "Why?"

"Dunno," You Miao replied.

Li Zhifeng's brows were deeply knitted. You Miao looked at him, and the two quietly gazed at each other. All of a sudden, You Miao broke into a laugh. What was there to lie about with Li Zhifeng?

"After this battle is over, the current arrangement will change," You Miao explained truthfully.

Li Zhifeng was even more confused now, and his frown deepened. You Miao didn't want to explain too plainly to Li Zhifeng at first, afraid he'd think too much about Zhao Chao being conniving. But with things as they were, he had no choice but to lay it out.

"The next step after you and Nie-da-ge go out there and win the battle would certainly be to demand negotiations with the Tartars," You

Miao explained.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Li Zhifeng asked.

You Miao stared at Li Zhifeng. "Negotiation means we must make them release the Emperor and the Grand Emperor. As long as one of two emperors return, Zhao Chao won't be able to keep his position. The government that's finally settled down will have to shuffle the deck again."

Li Zhifeng looked obviously angered by that, and he was practically speechless. "Why are you Hans so…"

You Miao teased, "Aren't you a Han now, too? Marry a chicken, follow the chicken; marry a dog, follow the dog…" [25]

"…"

"Why don't you go back first?" You Miao said. "Ugh, it's finally gonna rain. It's been so stuffy; my head's been throbbing. I didn't sleep well last night, either."

"Get on the horse. I'll take you out for a stroll," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao had been feeling inexplicably irritated since leaving the palace, and after strolling around the city with Li Zhifeng on horseback, he hugged him around the waist.

"I'm homesick," he said.

"Let's go home, then?" Li Zhifeng suggested.

You Miao certainly wanted to return to the estate, but the dispatch issue was still suspended and unresolved. There were surprisingly no days off even after having worked at the Administration Chamber for two months. If things went on like this, he'd die, suffocated to death.

"I'll talk to your teacher and take you home for a few days," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao creased his brows. “Then what about the whole dispatch thing?”

Li Zhifeng asked him, “Does Lao-San look like he’s going to dispatch any armies to you?”

You Miao laughed in response. “Very well, then. Let’s go and see what my teacher says.”

Li Zhifeng spurred the horse on, traversing down the long alleyways, and returned to the Administration Chamber. The two dismounted, and when You Miao went inside to find Sun Yu, he found Nie Dan sitting in the inner yard instead.

Li Zhifeng’s brows twitched, frowning. “Da-ge?”

Nie Dan gave a light nod, gesturing that he needn’t say anything. Sun Yu was sitting in the other chair, his eyes closed and unspeaking.

With a single look, You Miao could tell that Nie Dan was here for Sun Yu, hoping to win his support.

“It’s too soon,” Sun Yu said. “General Nie, this old man also did not expect this situation.”

“Hemetir’s ambition is greater than we first thought, and also more anxious,” Nie Dan said with a frown. “This is the perfect time.”

You Miao sat down at the table and Sun Yu turned toward him, opening his eyes.

“General Nie is here to seek help. You. Can you convince His Majesty to dispatch the army?” he questioned him.

You Miao’s brows were deeply locked, and for the moment all eyes were on him. He sighed. How would he even go about this? There really were way too many issues in play. He didn’t answer, and Sun Yu immediately guessed what was on his mind.

“It’s fine if you cannot,” Nie Dan said. “I will leave the city tonight. And tomorrow, General Huwei and I will split two ways and set off as planned, and then strike Dong River County at night—”

“No!” Sun Yu’s face dropped. “The new emperor has only just started to be involved in military matters. How can you set off unauthorized?”

The group fell silent again. After a moment of thought, Sun Yu said, “Never mind, never mind. I guess this old man will personally go to him tomorrow.”

“Sir, I will go,” You Miao said.

Sun Yu gave him a smile, approval apparent in his eyes. “How sure are you of success?”

You Miao wasn’t sure at all, but at a time like this, he knew it was his turn to step up—even if he had to force himself. Zhao Chao knew Sun Yu’s intentions, so it didn’t really matter whether he or Sun Yu went.

“Then Li Zhifeng and I will make preparations,” Nie Dan said.

“So soon?” You Miao was taken aback.

Nie Dan nodded. “Let’s go!”

Li Zhifeng stood, and You Miao immediately called out, “Wait! Take me to the camp first.”

That night, the lamps inside Rende Hall were alight. Zhao Chao was silently reading through the memorials, and the military tally lay on his desk. A palace attendant entered to report that Supervisory Secretary You Miao from the Administration Chamber had requested an audience.

“Tell him We know what he wants, but We haven’t come to Our decision yet. Have him come again tomorrow morning,” Zhao Chao said.

“Lord You said that if Your Majesty won’t see him, he will wait outside the hall,” the palace attendant answered.

Zhao Chao could feel his head throb again. “Okay, okay, okay… Announce him in.”

The palace attendant bowed and stepped down. A short moment later, You Miao walked in, and the sight of him made Zhao Chao pause. He was wearing leather armor and was fully geared up. When he entered the palace, he removed his longsword and handed it to the guard.

Zhao Chao frowned. “What are you doing?”

You Miao answered, “I’m here to beg you for permission to avenge the professors and the people of the Central Plains who died a violent death.”

Zhao Chao drew in a deep breath and looked at You Miao calculatingly. The wind picked up outside, and the newly planted bamboo swayed furiously. The undulating howls sounded like resentful spirits screeching their miseries.

“Your Highness!” You Miao cried. His eyes were red as he took a step forward, his gaze fixed on Zhao Chao. “I know what you’re thinking.”

Zhao Chao sighed tiredly. “I also know you know what I’m thinking.”

You Miao frowned. “Now is the perfect time, san-ge. Da-ge is ready. Do you only want to keep a mere nook secure, or do you want to reclaim the whole country?”

“But you can’t guarantee what will happen after!” Zhao Chao exclaimed furiously.

“No matter what happens, I will always take your side,” You Miao said. “Let us go to battle. The army is ready. All we need is for you to give us the military tally, and Nie-da-ge and Li Zhifeng will open fire… If we miss this chance, we might not get any more in the future.”

Zhao Chao stared hard at You Miao. “No matter what happens, you will always take my side?” he mumbled.

You Miao nodded. “I did in the past, I am now, so of course I will in the future.”

Zhao Chao sighed. “Take it.”

When You Miao approached and picked up the military tally, Zhao Chao flashed him a small smile. “The people first, society second, and the ruler below them. Go on, then. I’ll be waiting for your military reports.”

As though a heavy burden was lifted, You Miao picked up the tally and then turned around and dashed out of the palace, hopping on a horse and spurring it on at the fastest speed to charge into the Ministry of War.

Ping Xi was still at work, and as soon as he saw You Miao, he said, “Your teacher gave us a heads-up. Everything’s ready.”

You Miao took the order paper and the Army Supervisor seal.

“Who’s supervising the army?” Ping Xi asked.

“Me,” You Miao replied. “We’re setting out tonight. I’m off to the east camp now.”

Ping Xi smiled. “Come back victorious.”

“If any ministers protest at tomorrow’s court, be sure to hold down the fort for me,” You Miao said.

“Of course!”

Clad in armor, You Miao sped across the imperial capital and arrived at the east camp. Li Zhifeng was waiting for him outside. The gales grew fiercer as the army departed overnight. You Miao led the clearing of checkpoints, opening the city gates, and seventy percent of the troops stationed in Yang Prefecture cleared out that night as they hurried toward Pei County to convene with Nie Dan’s units.

The winds blew ever harder, and Sun Yu stood in the yard, gazing at the night sky with his hands clasped behind his back.

One of the supervisory secretaries approached him. “Sir, the memorials to the throne for tomorrow have been organized.”

Sun Yu turned around. “Tell them that I am sick tomorrow and will not be attending court.”

The supervisory secretary stood there stunned as Sun Yu returned to his chamber.

[Text Break]

As the gales raged on, Li Zhifeng sped across the plains thousands of miles outside Mao County. Bracing against the wild winds, You Miao shouted at Li Zhifeng.

“Why is the wind so strong?!”

“A typhoon is coming!” Li Zhifeng shouted back.

It was then that You Miao finally realized that Nie Dan indeed had *everything* prepared. The army of six thousand under Li Zhifeng’s command urgently made their way toward Pei County all through the night, heading eastward as they ran against the wind. By early morning, the sky had darkened and all was obscured by the oncoming storm. Nie Dan was waiting outside Pei County City with ten thousand men to convene with them.

Every soldier had changed into carapace armor made of the finest iron, weighing nearly twenty pounds. Coupled with the heavy clops of hooves, they sounded like gods of death as they crossed Hupao River. After the units broke off, they approached the main Tartar camp from every direction.

“Disperse—stand in formation!” Nie Dan roared.

At his command, eight poles flying the army banner each led a unit of two thousand as they scattered across the land.

The heavens were dark and crazed winds howled. Further east of Pei County, at the Dong River Plains near the sea, the downstream river

waters were rapidly rising and rolling onto land with the force of the typhoon. You Miao had to hand it to Nie Dan — a general had to always take advantage of the time, place, and circumstances, and no one else in the past century was as worthy of the title "God of War."

The Tartar camp was situated north of Dong River. The northern Barbarians had never experienced typhoons by the seaside, and were thrown into complete disorder. Waves of crazed gales and torrential rains were crashing in, upending everything. The torches were all extinguished. In this storm, Tianqi's cavalry, led by Nie Dan and Li Zhifeng, formed two chains of yin and yang and rotated soundlessly as they surrounded the Tartar camp.

Absolute darkness enveloped the area for a hundred-mile radius. You Miao's heart was pounding in his chest, and he could even hear the screams of the Tartars carried over by the wild winds. The cloth tents were being torn up by the typhoon gales and whipped into the sky. The Tartar soldiers emerged to secure the tents, but the speed of the wind was blowing harder and harder as the typhoon rolled ashore and into the plains.

You Miao couldn't help but feel shaken by the force of this typhoon as well. He may have grown up in Jiangnan, but he nonetheless had never seen such violent winds. After the typhoon touched down on shore and entered land, it would weaken as it crossed through the mountain ranges. However, the Tartars just happened to have built camp at the wind gap. With the help of the tempestuous winds, the Tianqi's soldiers' morale surged explosively in a split second.

Nie Dan roared, " *Charge* —!"

His voice was instantly drowned by the winds. Clad in iron armor, over ten thousand of Tianqi's cavalry appeared from all directions as they charged toward the main Tartar camp. The storm had already blown the camp's defense to pieces; the chevaux de frises were tumbling across the plains. The earth shook from the stomping of hooves, but their sound was drowned out by the violent winds.

"Charge—!" Li Zhifeng cried.

The iron cavalry charged and the Tartar camp fell apart at once. Everything was muddled in the storm. The Tartars mounted their horses, but the whipping winds rendered them unable to meet their foes. Nie Dan had been training the units for this very moment. After the Tartar camp was scattered by the charge, his troops met with Li Zhifeng's, who had charged from the opposite end. The two units brushed past each other as they continued their attack.

It was an utter defeat for the Tartar army, and their tent cloths flew into the sky. You Miao had been watching the battle from the Hupao River highlands, and he was so shaken he couldn't speak. The battle had been akin to a ritual that swept across the entire Divine Land—just like the Wrath of Heaven described in the ancient legends. The Tianqi army, in battle armor, were like the descendants of divine soldiers and obliterated the Tartar army in mere seconds. Splattered blood covered the ground, and amidst the dark hills, torn cloths dyed red whirled in the fury of gods descended from the heavens as they were sent hurtling toward the horizon.

The tempest raged on, obscuring everything in Mao County. With hands clasped behind him, Zhao Chao stood on the veranda and remained sleepless the entire night.

At dawn, a palace attendant approached him and reminded softly, "Your Majesty, it is time for the morning assembly."

Zhao Chao nodded.

Bodies in piles across the Dong River Plains were reflected in You Miao's eyes. The deserting Tartar soldiers had scattered over the hills, and the cavalry led by Li Zhifeng had already returned to their stronghold. They dropped their carapace armor before they went upstream of Dong River to chase the deserting soldiers.

"We've won—!" a soldier cried.

"Get the hell out of the Central Plains, Tartars!" yelled another, angrily.

At last, the fury and deep-seated hatred that had been pent up for far too long was vented. the Tianqi army killed every last deserting Tartar soldier without mercy, the sound of their fury reverberating far and wide with the typhoon winds. The mountains cried and the seas howled, shaking the entire great earth.

"This is still early…" You Miao mumbled. "The real battle has only just begun. Quick, return to Maocheng at once!"

Noon had passed by the time You Miao returned to Maocheng, yet the sky was still grey and gloomy. Reports had been streaming like rivers into the city, one after the other. The moment he stepped foot into the city, he was stopped by a soldier.

"I'm the Northern Expedition Army's Army Supervisor!" You Miao shouted.

"Lord You!" As it turned out, the man wasn't a soldier, but the Vice Minister of War. He shouted back, "Minister Ping requests for you to attend court!"

Was the morning assembly not yet dismissed? You Miao had planned on reporting to Sun Yu back at the Administration Chamber first, but since he was stopped by Ping Xi's subordinate, he had no choice but to turn his horse in the direction of the palace's Taihe Hall.

The court had kicked up a huge fuss at this point; Sun Yu didn't attend, and the civil officials were quarreling so hard they were ready to throw fists. The Censor-in-Chief was furiously accusing Ping Xi and the others of rashly dispatching the army, certain that they would call forth disaster.

Zhao Chao sat on the throne with a faint sneer on his lips. The Censor-in-Chief could yell all he wanted, but he didn't dare to provoke him, so he had been indirectly scolding Ping Xi.

"Lord Ping!" exclaimed the Censor-in-Chief. "Without His Majesty's military tally, you are dispatching the army without

authorization! There's barely three thousand men left in Yang Prefectural City's defense. If anything should happen, who will take responsibility?!"

A group of ministers were calling for Ping Xi to be sentenced. You Miao spurred his horse at top speed and reached Wumen Gate before he hurried into the great hall.

"Report—!"

You Miao's voice was loud and clear; the group inside hadn't fully registered what was happening when he barged into the room like a whirlwind. Clad in military gear, he bent one knee to the ground.

"Our army is victorious! General Zhengbei and General Huwei joined hands and killed all the Tartar soldiers on the north shore of Dong River. *The Tartar army has been completely annihilated* !"

One could hear a pin drop inside the hall.

Zhao Chao had waited all morning for this news. He said with a sneer, "Assembly dismissed."

Then, he stood and left. The ministers were speechless. Ping Xi wiped away his sweat and leaned against a pillar, unable to say anything for the longest time.

Thus ended the storm. Although the force of the winds weakened, they still carried over waves of rain. After You Miao got back, he sat down and leaned against the railings of the veranda, watching the sky half-asleep while he waited for Li Zhifeng to return.

At dusk, a soldier came to deliver word that Li Zhifeng had withdrawn the troops and returned to guard Yang Prefecture. He wouldn't be back until midnight, and You Miao shouldn't worry. Meanwhile, Nie Dan had followed up the victory by reclaiming the north of Liu Prefecture and the four hundred miles of land east of southern Su Prefecture. This was the greatest victory Tianqi had won since the escape to the south. That night, the entire city was decorated with lanterns and colored streamers, welcoming the return of Yang Prefecture's Defense Army.

The typhoon was over the next day, and reports were piled mountains high at the Administration Chamber. Southern Su Prefecture had been reclaimed and all six ministries had sent in their memorials regarding the recounted census. Since there had been a typhoon, the seaside regional governments were busy reporting their disaster situations. You Miao was practically in tears when he sat down in his seat.

"Didn't you do this to yourself?"

Sun Yu seldom joked with You Miao, and not knowing whether to laugh or cry, he answered, "Sir, you're the one who did this, not me…"

"Nonsense." Sun Yu glared at him, his beard bristling, acting like an old naughty child. "I've been sick for days! What time do I have to go fight battles?"

"Okay, okay, okay." You Miao dropped his mannerly conduct this once, too, and coaxed Sun Yu like a child. "It's all your student's fault…"

Sun Yu grinned, stroking his beard. "As long as you're aware. Now clean up after yourself within the few days."

You Miao was dumbstruck.

And surprisingly, Sun Yu really did leave things to You Miao, departing with a sweep of his sleeves. You Miao was rendered extremely speechless. Since Zhao Chao's return, Sun Yu had indeed directed everything perfectly and clandestinely—from the Pei County battle in the fifth month, to Zhao Chao's ascension in the sixth month, and now Nie Dan and Li Zhifeng's campaign. You Miao had to admit that he had also become one of Sun Yu's key chess pieces.

What the court ministers were most terrified of was a Tartar counterattack—yet the situation played out as Sun Yu had predicted. After the Tartars ran away in defeat, the Huns and the Dis encircled the east and the west. They occupied their claimed land while the Tartars occupied their own—none of them went to battle against the other; nothing happened between them.

You Miao knew Hemetir had to be grinding his teeth with hate toward them, and although the current situation kept him from fighting back, he would definitely remember this score. That was the Tartars' nature. Back when they were escaping Da'an, Hemetir had no qualms sending out his personal guards to pursue them, if only to recapture them.

Then what was the next step? Negotiate with the Tartars? Bring the two emperors back? You Miao trusted that Sun Yu would have his own arrangements, but he still couldn't help but worry about Zhao Chao. If Sun Yu and Zhao Chao ended up dividing into two separate camps, whose side should he take? Sun Yu hadn't brought up the question again since he first posed it, so You Miao had no choice but to keep it on the back burner as well.

Meanwhile, after the great victory at Dong River, Li Zhifeng had instantly became a hero known to every household. The people of Yang Prefectural City even crowned him with the title "Iron Wolf." Portrayed vividly and colorfully, the story of the Battle of Dong River was told everywhere inside teahouses, taverns, streets, and alleys of Yang and Su Prefectures, as well as Mao County. Everyone was talking about Li Zhifeng.

"You're famous now," You Miao said with a grin.

Li Zhifeng, however, was frowning deeply. "I don't get it."

"What?" You Miao looked up at him.

Autumn had arrived, and as evening fell, flaming clouds stretched across the vast expanse of the horizon. You Miao and Li Zhifeng were sitting side by side on the Yang Prefectural City's river shore. The water level was quite low; there were even some areas where it was just mud puddles. You Miao stared at Li Zhifeng, thinking he had matured quite a bit.

Five years ago, when they first met, You Miao was only fifteen. At the time, Li Zhifeng was downtrodden and spiritless. Although he was gaunt and fierce, he carried a vague sense of arrogance. Now that he was with You Miao, he had significantly matured, transforming completely from

a cub to an adult wolf. His demeanor carried the tenacity and determination that only came with having experienced battle, making him appear indescribably reliable.

You Miao studied him quietly. Seeing that look in his eyes, Li Zhifeng asked, “What is it?”

“You’ve changed, too,” You Miao remarked.

Li Zhifeng didn’t answer, but he pulled You Miao into his arms and brushed a kiss against his cheek.

You Miao recognized the look in his eyes; he had seen the same look onin Nie Dan. It was courage and conviction, formed through severe training, forging, and battle testing.

“What don’t you get?” You Miao asked.

“I don’t understand. Da-ge was the one who prepared for this battle, but all the credit came to me,” Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao grinned. “If he wants you to have the credit, then just take it. Don’t you consider him one of us? Well, it’s the same for him too. So what are you moping around for?”

“It’s not fair to him,” Li Zhifeng said.

“What’s there to be fair about? He’s already reached the apex of his career. He won’t have a good time if he received any more credit to his name,” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng was confused. You Miao knew he was splitting hairs again, but it really was too complicated to explain the political trickeries and calculations in all this.

“We Hans aren’t very direct about things. Don’t worry about it, just leave this to me.”

Li Zhifeng nodded, looking cheered again, and passed You Miao a bag of fried fish to munch on. The scenery of dusk was beautiful; the

shallow waves of the river shimmered and there were two small cups of wine sitting by their hands. However, after You Miao had listened to Li Zhifeng's concerns, an uneasiness abruptly sprouted within him.

Mutual jostling was inevitable at court. Nie Dan wanted to promote Li Zhifeng. Half the reason was because they were kindred spirits, and the other was because Li Zhifeng possessed the capacity to become a talented commander. Nie Dan was someone who held very high standards, and he wouldn't spare even half a word for those he didn't care for—which was how he had managed to offend a bunch of civil officials at court.

The fact that Nie Dan thought highly of Li Zhifeng meant they were matched in strength, and that he appreciated him as an equal. In the present Tianqi, a thousand gold was easier to obtain than one commanding general. Had Nie Dan and Li Zhifeng been opponents, they might have kicked up a huge storm. So how fortunate was it that they were colleagues instead, and within the same government?

Li Zhifeng had only shown the tip of the iceberg of his abilities, and that had already put many at court on guard. Based on You Miao's understanding of those people, they were more than likely going to start looking for trouble.

"What are you thinking about now?" Li Zhifeng asked, using his fingers to rub and ease You Miao's furrowed brows.

You Miao snapped back to the present, but didn't tell Li Zhifeng his worries. "Thinking about the harvest," he said instead.

"Then let's go back to the estate tomorrow for a rare three-day vacation," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao smiled. "Let's leave tonight, I'm missing home."

"I'll be right back, then. Wait for me," Li Zhifeng said.

He stood up and headed back to camp, leaving You Miao to sit by the river all by himself. As the sky gradually darkened, Li Zhifeng waited until the last patrol returned to the city before he made his arrangements for

defense affairs. Then, he returned to the river on horse to take You Miao back to the estate.

[Chapter 45]

In the first reigning year of Wu Hui, a great drought took hold of the land.

At dusk, You Miao and Li Zhifeng escaped from Yang Prefectural City while it was still light out. You Miao had been reading the reports at the Administration Chamber for a long time now; this great drought—which had lasted for three months at this point—had resulted in scarcely any harvest in Jiangnan. With barely any rain, the crops had all withered under the scorching sun and the grounds were cracking from the dryness.

Grain from the state treasury hadn't yet been dispensed to the people, mainly because it wasn't yet time for the Autumn harvest. But seeing how it would be in ten days, You Miao looked on at the unending barren fields along the road and knew trouble was on its way.

"Does disaster relief fall under the jurisdiction of the Administration Chamber?" Li Zhifeng asked.

You Miao shook his head. "For a serious disaster like this, the Ministry of Revenue will have to submit a direct written statement to the emperor. Let's hope that bugger Shaonan can manage."

You Miao only knew that the drought was serious, but he didn't realize that it had gotten *this* bad. On the way from Yang Prefecture to Liu Prefecture, nine out of ten paddy fields were barren. The smaller rivers had run dry, and in some areas, it didn't even require a detour to a bridge to cross them—horses could simply trot across the riverbeds.

As they drew near the Yangtze River under the starry night sky, they could finally detect the scent of water in the air. There were more waterwheels along the road, so some water should be flowing in the canals for irrigation.

With twinkling stars draped down his back, Li Zhifeng alighted the horse and washed his face at one of the canals. Meanwhile, You Miao scanned around the area to examine the rice ears nearby. Although the irrigation was working, things didn't look very optimistic.

All was quiet when they returned to the manor that night. Riverwave Estate was covered with long stretches of fertile land, and even Guozhuang Village's fields in the south were by proxy irrigated. The sweet scent of rice crops wafted in waves. You Miao was elated at this sight, but also vaguely worried. His own land was taken care of by the waterwheel. As good as *his* harvest would be, many places he had witnessed along the way were too tragic to bear, and most of their tenant farmers had already packed up and left.

The boy servant on night duty was overjoyed when he saw You Miao return, but You Miao quickly gestured for him to not alert the others.

"Has Mrs. Qian gone to bed?" Li Zhifeng asked.

"Yes, not too long ago," replied the boy servant. "I'll go wake her up right now to make young master some refreshments."

Changyuan was still groggy with sleep when he woke, but he quickly went to manage the food. You Miao's initial eight boy attendants had all now become managers, and they were the ones who ran everything at the estate.

Now that he was home, You Miao actually felt a bit foreign being here. After refreshments were had, he and Li Zhifeng retired to their room. At last—after three full months of never-ending work, they could finally relax for a few days. That night, as if he was a ravenous wolf that hadn't fed for months, Li Zhifeng ravaged You Miao the entire night. It wasn't until daybreak that You Miao finally fell groggily asleep, hugging Li Zhifeng. As he drifted off, he wondered why the two of them still acted like a couple of newlyweds when they had been together for years now. He had really fallen into Li Zhifeng's hands for the rest of his life.

However, You Miao wasn't asleep for long before a commotion started outside.

"Why aren't you up yet?" someone said, before pushing the door in.

Li Zhifeng immediately sat up. It was the first time anyone had barged into You Miao's room without any greetings. You Miao got up in a flurry, almost completely awake from the slumber he had just fallen into.

"Who's guarding the chamber?" Li Zhifeng yelled, outraged, and slipped on his robes to go out — only to come face to face with You Dechuan.

Utterly flustered and red in the face, You Dechuan's beard bristled and trembled. Coldly, he stammered, "You…You… *YOU MIAO* !"

You Dechuan was not stupid; he knew exactly what was going on the moment he saw his own son holding another man under the covers. After throwing on his own clothes, You Miao also emerged, looking upset at how boorishly his old dad had barged into his room. Madam Wang had come as well, and after seeing the situation, she quickly dragged You Dechuan away. The boy servants then rushed to guard the courtyard's entrance.

You Miao had wanted to flip out on the spot—how many months had gone by since the last time he'd given the old fart grief?! What the heck! You Miao and Li Zhifeng stared at each other for a moment, then for some reason, You Miao snorted and laughed out loud.

Li Zhifeng felt helpless, but You Miao waved dismissively. "Forget it, whatever."

Since they were up, You Miao unpacked and tidied his things, and then after breakfast, he went to the main hall. You Dechuan's expression was unnatural, and when You Miao sat down in the head seat, Li Zhifeng went to brew tea.

"So what do you want?" You Miao asked.

You Dechuan heaved a long sigh; he seemed to want to give his son a good scolding, but was at the same time afraid of You Miao's authority. Next to him, Madam Wang tugged on his sleeve, signaling that he shouldn't bring up what had been exposed earlier in the morning.

After some thought, You Dechuan replied, “Your brother sent news from Maocheng saying that Liu Prefecture has been recovered.”

“Yeah,” You Miao answered flippantly, still feeling a little upset.

“Can you get His Majesty to give back our land?” You Dechuan asked.

“Right now, probably not.”

You Miao was immediately annoyed by his question. You Dechuan had sought him out a few times, and every time it was either to ask for an official position for You Hange or to tell him to ask Zhao Chao for land. The very thought of it made You Miao uncomfortable.

You Dechuan continued, “I heard you’ve been very busy at the Administration Chamber. Your brother called on you a few times and was stopped by the concierge — ”

Madam Wang immediately interrupted with a smile. “What are you saying? As if Miao-zi would avoid his brother like that. Miao-zi, don’t let your dad’s words get to you, he’s put his foot in his mouth…”

“I need to attend morning court, so I’m not there in the mornings,” You Miao replied. “In the evenings, I always go eat with Li Zhifeng at the barracks, so if it’s something important, tell da-ge to write me a note and leave it with the concierge. I’ll go to him at the Ministry of Revenue when I see it.”

You Dechuan grunted. He looked at Li Zhifeng, then looked at You Miao. He looked as if he had something to say, but Li Zhifeng only responded to his stare with a faint smile.

“Have some tea, uncle.”

A boy servant approached and brought the tea to You Dechuan. Now You Dechuan didn’t know what to say. He asked again a moment later, “When can we get our Sunshower Tea Estate’s land back?”

"Dunno…" You Miao already felt his head throbbing. He'd wanted to rest by coming home. "I'll try my best."

"Throughout this whole month, the people of Liu Prefecture have been saying that we can go back soon," You Dechuan added.

You Miao thought he best be blunt and make things absolutely clear, lest You Dechuan make random promises to people. "Dad, let me be honest with you. It doesn't matter who Liu Prefecture's fields belong to, it's impossible to get them back. So you just stay here in the manor and relax."

You Dechuan was shocked to hear this, and You Miao continued, "Liu Prefecture was just recovered. Nie Dan isn't certain he can hang on to it, so there'll probably be back and forth fighting. There are still more problems on the way, so again, just stay here in the manor and relax."

You Dechuan frowned. "What problems can there be?"

He looked as if You Miao had just shattered the dream he'd been harboring for a long time, and suddenly, it was as though he had aged overnight.

It's been many years, after all, You Miao thought, watching his father. That there would actually come a day when the old fart would fall so low… You Miao thought of his mother, and how she had brought with her several thousand of the Qiao family's tea shoots as her dowry, to earnestly help You Dechuan start his business. And this was what it came to in the end. Truly, how life swings up and down… What would his mother think, if her spirit in the heavens knew what was happening now?

You Dechuan didn't look like he planned on leaving any time soon, so You Miao wanted to duck out and check on the estate. He shot Li Zhifeng a look, and Li Zhifeng stood up, following him out.

Riverwave Estate was the very picture of rich and fertile land. Although the sky was clear and the baking sun drenched them in sweat, the upcoming harvest should still be good. The tenant farmers all straightened up from the fields to greet You Miao hello.

They hadn't walked for long before Yaoguang dashed over on horseback with a message.

"Shaoye!" Yaoguang shouted from the horse. "Someone's come from Maocheng! They said General Li has been summoned to court to discuss matters!"

You Miao blew up the moment he heard this. "Tell him—General Li ain't here!"

Li Zhifeng quickly pulled You Miao back. He asked Yaoguang, "Where did the messenger come from? The Ministry or War or General Nie's camp?"

"The inner palace!" Yaoguang replied.

You Miao went back to check it out, and the person who'd come was surprisingly an old eunuch. Bearing up under the hot sun, the old eunuch could barely speak or hear clearly, and only repeated over and over that His Majesty had summoned Lord You the previous night, but the messenger was unsuccessful the two times he'd gone to the Administration Chamber, so Li Zhifeng was summoned instead. Yet Li Zhifeng wasn't around either, so the emperor had flown into a rage and didn't sleep the entire night.

When Li Zhifeng heard that the summon had come from Zhao Chao, he told the old eunuch, "Go back and tell His Majesty that I'm in Liu Prefecture investigating the movement of Barbarian scouts, that I'm busy with military affairs and cannot make myself available. I will go meet him the day after."

You Miao, however, didn't think that was right. "Never mind, I guess I'll make a trip back."

He could snub anyone but the emperor. If it was anyone else calling him back, he could've dodged them—but not Zhao Chao. Thus, You Miao had no choice but to climb onto the carriage and return to Maocheng with Li Zhifeng. He was pissed, though. He was finally home to relax for a few days, but the vacation got cut short.

The lamps were being lit by the time You Miao entered the palace. When the palace attendants saw You Miao had arrived, they quickly passed down the announcement of his arrival. And when You Miao finally saw Zhao Chao, Zhao Chao almost threw the entire stack of memorials at his face.

"Explain to me *right now* what is up with this!" Zhao Chao yelled.

The memorials he'd whipped at You Miao fell into a heap on the ground. You Miao was instantly incensed. He thought angrily, *For the sake of this crappy government of yours, I fucking slave away from the moment I open my eyes into the deep of the night. There isn't even enough time to do it with Li Zhifeng, so what's with this shitty attitude?!*

You Miao drew in a deep breath. He was going to blow his top, but with consideration that Zhao Chao was now the emperor, he absolutely *could not* throw a fit. Without a choice, he sucked it up and bowed subserviently, and then picked up the memorials on the ground.

Zhao Chao could tell by You Miao's expression that he was being cussed out, and this added fuel to his fire. "What's that you said?!"

You Miao grinned. "I said, if you have something to say, then be nice about it. Why get so mad?"

As soon as that cheeky grin appeared on You Miao's face, Zhao Chao wasn't able to throw a fit anymore. He sat down heavily, irritated and drained, and rubbed his temple.

"Stayed up all night?" You Miao asked without looking up. He opened one of the memorials he'd picked up and skimmed through it.

"No," Zhao Chao replied with a huff.

You Miao tossed the first memorial book back onto Zhao Chao's imperial desk. It landed in the inkstone, splashing Zhao Chao in the face. Zhao Chao glared, ready to go off again, but You Miao burst out laughing and then quickly went to help wipe his face clean with his sleeve. Zhao Chao was bitter from his fury, yet You Miao's nearness gave him an

indescribable comfort. He pushed You Miao away, but You Miao was insistent on wiping him.

"Peace, Your Majesty. Peace." You Miao smiled apologetically.

The two pushed and pulled at each other until Zhao Chao finally flashed a hopeless grin. He smacked You Miao over the back of the head and kicked him away. Thus, You Miao sat himself down in front of the imperial desk to flip through the memorials to the throne.

It was book after book of accusations and charges against Li Zhifeng.

"Arrogant and domineering," Zhao Chao recited, "He indulged the soldiers under him by allowing them to engage in private brawls, plunder from the people, sexually harass women, waste food… I summoned you twice in succession last night for this reason. You weren't around, nor was Li Zhifeng…"

You Miao scrunched up his face. "How can you fault me for that? I clearly already asked for days off…"

Zhao Chao exclaimed furiously, " *And* —you best clean up that crappy act of yours at your estate; it's too crassly done. Aside from forcibly occupying Quan Mountain, you even communicated secretly with the six ministries. Now even your colleagues at the Administration Chamber are charging you with misconduct. What will you have me say?!"

You Miao yelled back at Zhao Chao, practically blowing up, "What crappy act?! Isn't it just half a hillside? The fields don't even have water—if you want it, then why don't you go and take it back?!"

Zhao Chao's face was stormy, and You Miao flipped through each of the memorials to show him, practically shoving the books in his face. "Don't we have a drought his year? Tell me where the grain harvested from the Autumn Harvest is, the food that the soldiers are *supposedly* wasting!"

Annoyed, Zhao Chao countered, "If you want to argue, why didn't you go argue during the morning assembly?"

You Miao exclaimed furiously, “How should I have known they’d impeach Li Zhifeng today?! Twelve memorials! This is practically an arranged pact—” You Miao stopped abruptly when it clicked in his head. He muttered, “Fucking hell, this *was* arranged, wasn’t it?”

“As long as you’re aware,” Zhao Chao said coldly.

You Miao was perplexed. Of the twelve memorials to the throne, the one that reported his occupation of government land wasn’t anything to worry about—which Jiangnan clan didn’t take over government land? If Quan Mountain wasn’t given to You Miao, who would want to run to the frontlines to farm land? It was clearly just to give him a hard time. The charges against Li Zhifeng were even more unjust. Accusations of trampling fields and whatnot were without basis, yet it would be a huge issue if they were to stand. After all, since Tianqi’s founding, troops were strictly forbidden from making paths in farm fields. Back in the day, the founding father even decreed that a soldier should be beheaded if his horse entered the fields.

Private brawls among governed armed forces…was not that big of a deal, either. Whose troops never got drunk and fought? As for sexually harassing women… You Miao wanted to cry. Whoever got saddled with *that* charge was outta luck. And plundering the people? These two accusations were probably slander. He knew Li Zhifeng wasn’t strict with his men, but that didn’t mean those sorts of acts would happen.

“I’m taking these,” You Miao said, tucking the memorials away in his sleeve.

“How do you plan on resolving them?” Zhao Chao asked. “Stay for a meal, there are more matters to discuss.”

Feeling weak, You Miao replied, “Nah. It’s not like we’ll be sharing a table. What’s the point of eating alone in the side hall…”

However, Zhao Chao said, “You and I can make do here in the study, I’ll have the food brought over. I’ve got questions for you— *loads* of them—so don’t think about going back tonight, either.”

And so, You Miao had no choice but to obediently stay behind. With Zhao Chao blocking the allegations, the matter was technically over. But Li Zhifeng must never learn about this, or else he would certainly call on the houses of every single civil official, wielding his blade to stab them dead.

The palace attendants brought the meal into the room: it was two large bowls of white rice, a plate of fried eggs, a bowl of braised pork, a bowl of stir-fried vegetables, and small dishes of various pickles. You Miao couldn't help but wonder how Zhao Chao was eating worse than he was. He took a few bites of the rice, and after finding it a little tough to swallow, he ordered the servants to bring up tea, with which he soaked the rice before mixing in an egg.

Zhao Chao's brows were deeply locked, but he put more food into You Miao's bowl nonetheless. You Miao really couldn't bear to watch anymore, and he questioned the attendant, "His Majesty normally eats like this?"

"I'm helping you save money," Zhao Chao said irritably.

Not knowing whether to laugh or cry at that, You Miao pulled out four hundred silver worth of bills—the amount Qiao Jue had given him when he left. "Here. To help add to your meal. How unsightly is this?"

Zhao Chao glanced at the bills and replied helplessly, "I still haven't figured out what to do with Jiangnan's great drought."

"How much do you need?" You Miao forced himself to ask, knowing he couldn't get out of this.

Zhao Chao also looked quite guilty. "Do you have more?"

You Miao looked up. "Ten thousand silver?"

Tiredly, Zhao Chao said, "Pi County, Ding County, and the Yibei regions and others are the hardest hit by the disaster. At least one hundred thousand silver is needed. Not to mention no amount of money can buy any

rice at the moment, and only twenty-five thousand bushels of grain can be allocated from Xichuan."

"Twenty thousand silver?" You Miao offered.

Zhao Chao smiled woefully. "Just give me seven or eight thousand. I'll think of something for the rest."

"Your government is practically a bottomless hole, jeez," You Miao said, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

Zhao Chao sighed again. With grains of rice sticking to his face, You Miao patted Zhao Chao's shoulder and told him not to be so worried.

A moment later, as You Miao ate, Zhao Chao turned to him again and said, "I'm sending Li Zhifeng on an expedition. I need him."

You Miao's face twitched. "If you know you need him, then those twelve memorials…"

"Didn't I take it all for him?" Zhao Chao replied with annoyance. "You didn't see how I was scolded like a dog at the morning assembly by the ministers this morning. Even Mister Sun couldn't bear to watch anymore."

You Miao quickly acquiesced with "yes, yes, yes," to soothe the feelings of this poor emperor dog. Every time Zhao Chao went off, You Miao could always perfectly subdue his fury. As the saying went, being close to the sovereign is as perilous as lying with a tiger, but You Miao was like a tamer; there was none other who could play around the way he did, whether it was at court or among the emperors throughout Tianqi history.

Zhao Chao became serious again and said, "Listen. I need er-ge to…exterminate bandits. Someone has to handle this problem, and he's the only one I can rely on…"

You Miao looked at him, confused.

"Northwest of Yang Prefecture, in Jiang Prefecture and Jiao Prefecture areas, there are refugees who, due to the flood last year and the

drought this year, are…causing unrest," Zhao Chao explained.

Immediately, You Miao knew this was no small matter.

"An insurrection, just like that?"

Zhao Chao frowned, staring at You Miao. You Miao realized he'd misspoken and quickly covered his mouth.

"There are one hundred thousand involved now," Zhao Chao said. "They're made up of northern refugees who haven't received land, and southern tenant farmers who suffered a barren harvest."

"My god…" You Miao muttered, finally understanding the scale of this issue.

Zhao Chao dropped his voice and said, "This news is something that was just delivered today, with the utmost urgency. Jiang Prefecture's governor didn't dare to report it at first and dragged it out for some time, suppressing the news. But now the numbers are rising… Other than the Administration Chamber and the Ministry of War, the other ministers at court don't know yet."

You Miao frowned. "But you're telling Li Zhifeng to fight unarmed civilians…"

"I'll go fight them myself, then?" Zhao Chao said sarcastically.

You Miao heaved a sigh. Fighting foreign outsiders and fighting civilians were not the same. He was not a bit afraid when it came to killing Barbarians, but killing refugees was a merit-damaging affair. What wrong had they done? So many were starving—was survival not the reason they would rob the government coffers on an empty stomach, and pillage the households and plunder the granaries of the gentry?

These were truly external woes and internal troubles; a battle between water and fire.

While You Miao fell into deep contemplation, Zhao Chao continued, "Civil uprisings are already happening in Jiang Prefecture and

surrounding areas, so the disaster relief efforts in Jiangdong and Jiangnan will need to be arranged as soon as possible. When you go back to the Administration Chamber, the Policy Advisor will discuss plans and options with you. The imperial edict has already gone out to Ping Xi, and control of grain provisions for both military and disaster relief will be given to you. Pass it on to Li Zhifeng and have him set out in the name of quelling bandits while you manage things between the Administration Chamber and the Ministry of War. I don't trust anyone else with this. Da-ge needs to defend the frontlines, so he's not available, but if this task was given to someone else… First of all, these are fellow countrymen; another person wouldn't be able to do something like killing refugees. Second of all, military achievements will need to be falsified… This matter doesn't allow for any carelessness, and needs to be suppressed as soon as possible. You get it."

You Miao could only nod. The two were done with their meal, but with a belly full of thoughts and now an influx of issues, instead of feeling satiated, You Miao only felt the ache of indigestion. The palace maid brought tea out, and this time, it had been changed to iced oolong plum. After downing half a cup, You Miao finally felt a little better.

"There's one more thing," Zhao Chao said.

"Oh my god, spare me—!" You Miao wailed.

Zhao Chao laughed and consoled him, "It's a good thing."

As if You Miao would believe there could be anything good. He said weakly, "Go on, then. Tell me."

Amused, Zhao Chao said, "Xie Hui's branch of the Xie family is the most powerful in their clan, do you know of them?"

"Of course," You Miao replied irately. "The Minister of Revenue is from the Xie family."

Zhao Chao nodded. "Xie Hui's oldest brother, Xie Xingkong, wants his only daughter to marry you."

“Nope!” You Miao immediately responded. “This is non-negotiable!”

Zhao Chao frowned, not expecting You Miao to have such a huge adverse reaction. “What exactly are you thinking? You can’t be trying to emulate a woman by promising yourself to Li Zhifeng, are you?!”

You Miao waved dismissively. “This subject is closed. In fact, don’t bother talking to me about arranging any marriages for the rest of this life.”

He spoke so bluntly, without sparing any sensibilities, that Zhao Chao instantly became furious. He shouted, “How fucking dare you!”

You Miao knew that if he was going to insist on this matter, then he couldn’t make any concessions. “If you’re going to oppress me with imperial authority, then grant me my death.”

Zhao Chao was at a loss for words. “You—!”

“Li Zhifeng is going to cut down civilians for you, and you want me to join a marriage alliance. What will he think?” You Miao said.

Zhao Chao frowned. “I just want to make a match for you, for him, and for Nie Dan…”

“Forgive this subject for not daring to receive this edict,” You Miao replied.

There was no getting through to You Miao. Zhao Chao drew in a deep breath, then tried again with more patience.

“What the heck is wrong with your brain? Isn’t it normal for men to have multiple wives and concubines? If you marry Xie Xingkong’s daughter, life at court will be much easier in the future! The Minister of Revenue, Xie Hui, was speaking in your favor at court today… How can you be so…”

You Miao stood up, shaking his head, and Zhao Chao continued to do his utmost in encouraging him.

“Marrying her won’t interfere with your relationship with Li Zhifeng. Besides, you’re twenty now. Do you not care about producing an heir to carry on the You family line?! Your estate can only be managed with a woman at home, assisting the husband and raising the children… You Ziqian! What audacity! [26].”

With a stack of memorials in his arms, You Miao stood by the entrance of the study and watched Zhao Chao with wide-eyed shock. For some reason, the look made Zhao Chao’s heart soften in an instant. Those eyes had once shown the same timidity when he had slapped him at the Imperial College.

Completely drained, Zhao Chao had no choice but to concede and surrender. “You can go.”

You Miao nodded without saying anything more and bowed. “This subject will take his leave.”

What answered him was a heavy sigh, and once he had exited, he felt inexplicably miserable. He walked and walked, and then spaced out leaning against the palace door, not even noticing when he dropped memorial books until a guard picked them up and chased after him.

By the time he left the palace, it was already midnight. You Miao was horribly upset and unable to think, and when he returned to the Administration Chamber, he was also feeling a little crabby. Starting tomorrow, there would be enemies everywhere. He crashed head-first into his room, making Mu Feng jump in surprise and rushing to follow him in.

“I need peace and quiet,” You Miao said, effectively turning Mu Feng mute, and lay in his bed, shutting his eyes tiredly. A long time later, a knock came at his door. He angrily exclaimed, “I’m sleeping!”

“Got bullied?” Sun Yu answered.

This time, it was You Miao’s turn to jump in surprise, and he scrambled to get up to open the door. Standing in the yard holding a small clear glass lamp, its light shimmering, was Sun Yu —clad in white from head to toe, from his robes to his hair and beard.

"Sir?" You Miao exhaled, releasing his tension. A night breeze blew past; the night air of autumn was cool and refreshing. He explained, "I just came back from His Majesty's, and with everything piling up, I was feeling a little aggravated. Please don't blame me, sir…"

"State affairs aside, I'll only ask you one thing," Sun Yu said. "Do you want to remain at the Administration Chamber? If not, then go home. I will not blame you."

You Miao only hummed briefly before he smiled. "It's nothing of the sort, sir. I'm just moody, that's all. Packing up and leaving never crossed my mind."

Sun Yu seemed to have already known what You Miao had to face today, and asked, "Oh? Attacked from all sides and utterly isolated, with external woes and internal troubles. It's a pile of bad debt. Why *won't* you leave?"

"Can't. Heavy responsibilities rest on my shoulders," You Miao replied with a wry smile.

Sun Yu nodded in approval. "Not bad, you've grown. Go to bed now."

You Miao sighed in relief as Sun Yu turned to leave, and Mu Feng quickly went to send Sun Yu back to his chambers. As he watched his retreating back, You Miao felt mixed emotions course through him, but in spite of it all, delight sprouted deep inside.

That night, You Miao somehow managed to fall asleep, albeit gradually. Halfway through the night, someone came in and held him. He knew it was Li Zhifeng, so he curled comfortably in his arms and slept all the way until the first faint rays of dawn.

When he woke the next day, the spot beside him was already empty, and the only evidence Li Zhifeng had dropped by was a straw-plaited grasshopper beside his pillow. You Miao lazed in his bed instead of getting up, looking the grasshopper over and finding it funny. Who knew

where Li Zhifeng learned to plait a plaything like this — probably from the soldiers of Yang Prefectural Army.

Today was You Miao's scheduled day off, and no one had come to call him either, so he lay in bed for another while until hunger finally had him sluggishly sit up. After breakfast, he strolled to the main hall of the Administration Chamber. Sun Yu had already returned from the morning assembly, and he sat in his seat with his eyes half-lidded while everyone else worked away at their own respective desks. No one was surprised when they saw You Miao was actually around, as if him being there was the most natural thing.

You Miao greeted Sun Yu and his fellow colleagues good morning before he languidly entered his seat. He peered at his left and right; although silence reigned inside the hall, the jeers and internal curses from the gentle youths were practically roaring in his ears. You Miao's eyebrows twitched as he picked up a memorial and flipped through it.

Abruptly, Sun Yu asked him, "What did His Majesty say to you when he summoned you to the palace last night?"

Everyone froze. You Miao was taken aback by the question at first, but then it quickly dawned on him that Sun Yu was also a little angry about what had transpired at court the day before. Raising this subject in front of everyone was thus a warning to the supervisory secretaries not to go overboard with in-fighting and accusations of misconduct.

You Miao had also re-examined the incident in his head yesterday. He knew he had minor flaws, but there were definitely no issues with his conduct and character. Standing on the opposing side against the youths of the gentry was only a matter of circumstance. Everyone had their own circumstances, which made dispute inevitable, but to carry out personal grudges in the name of public interest and report him to the emperor seriously crossed the line. Sun Yu had a scale in his mind; he knew when to crack down and when to let things be, hence why he posed You Miao the question.

The question hinted to everyone in the hall that it was useless to bring a charge against Li Zhifeng and You Miao for personal gain—didn't Zhao Chao summon You Miao to the palace overnight anyway, regardless of their efforts? Who did they think they were? None of them had reached a position where they could report misconduct!

The gears in You Miao's head turned, and an idea struck him. He answered, "He talked about the refugees'…insur—uprising."

You Miao had heard too much from the professors at the Imperial College, and he'd almost call the refugee uprising an insurrection every time. Thankfully, he was always able to stop himself.

Sun Yu nodded, stroking his beard, and You Miao could see everyone was staring at him again. He had hated the way they looked at him ever since he had entered the Administration Chamber; it was as if everyone shared the same opinion. Not a single person considered him a colleague, but a problem instead. His head spinning rapidly, You Miao suddenly busted out a shocking statement.

"His Majesty said the reform must be carried out, and it will not do to continue dragging our feet."

Sun Yu didn't respond, and You Miao coolly said to the supervisory secretaries, "Famine has spread across Jiangnan this year. Because the people are miserable, many refugees in the western counties are raising armies and causing unrest. If the reform isn't carried out, then it'll truly be game over when Yang Prefecture falls into chaos too."

Even Sun Yu seemed to be a little stunned by his statement. The new law had been temporarily suppressed; who would've thought that You Miao would use this incident to re-open the case? Yet everything he said was so reasonable and logical that no one could rebuff him for the moment.

Tang Bo was the first to come back around, and he frowned. "Carry out the reform? But the autumn harvest is already over; even if we push it through, it'll still be a matter for spring next year."

“Allot fields and provide relief by year’s end,” You Miao said. “A large number of the unemployed can only survive winter with peace of mind if they have land of their own to watch over; it’ll give them hope for the new year. Otherwise… Well, we all know how things went down in the previous dynasty. I don’t think anyone can persuade His Majesty out of it this time. He’s dead set on bringing forth the reform.”

He had made things very blunt. What he referred to in regards to the dynasty before Tianqi was the multiple famines that took place during year ends that resulted in peasant uprisings. When the peasant army rebelled, the dynasty was annihilated, and it took over a decade of subsequent turmoil before Tianqi’s founding father united the land.

You Miao flashed a smile at Tang Bo sitting across from him, then turned to the other supervisory secretaries. “Allow me to advise everyone: do not go against the imperial will for the next little while. If there is something you wish to say, best make due consideration before you speak, lest His Majesty make an example out of you. You’ve been warned.”

Sun Yu had believed him at first, but when You Miao’s cheeky face came out at the end, he gave a hard *harrumph* . You Miao knew he exposed himself to him and stopped once he had made his point. Every supervisory secretary in the hall looked greatly shocked, while Sun Yu looked pensive, his brow deeply furrowed.

Although You Miao sat at his desk, his mind wasn’t on the memorials at all. After churning through all the thoughts in his head and coming back around, he thought with a start, *What the heck just came out of my mouth?!*

At the beginning, revenge was the only thing on You Miao’s mind. He had to express something in order to stand his ground, or else he would only continue to be oppressed and bullied by Tang Bo and the others, which was why he wanted to shock some fear into them. Yet the more he talked, he’d made everything sound so real that even Sun Yu believed him.

No, but…what came next? Would the law really change? You Miao suddenly had an audacious plan to push through the reform! Having thought

this far, he raised his eyes to look at Sun Yu. However, Sun Yu gave him an indistinct shake of his head and closed his eyes, signaling You Miao to not say any more.

[Chapter 46]

You Miao absentmindedly processed his official documents, his mind a mess the entire morning. In the afternoon, he asked for the rest of the day off. He planned on finding Li Zhifeng to resolve what he had discussed with Zhao Chao the night before, but just as he emerged after lunch, he was stopped by Sun Yu in the corridors. He quickly bowed.

Sun Yu dropped his voice to a near whisper and questioned, "What you said in the hall today, how much of it is real and how much of it is false?"

After sweeping his eyes around their surroundings and seeing that no one was around, You Miao hemmed and hawed his reply. "No… I just wasn't able to keep from running my mouth."

Sun Yu was utterly exasperated, but with incredible guts, You Miao asked him, "Sir, do you think the idea is feasible? If it is, then how about I submit the memorial for it instead of having you step in?"

Sun Yu gave a light wave of dismissal and replied in a low voice, "The time isn't right yet. Wait for me to make the arrangements. His Majesty has already left the bandits case to you; you will have to manage it wholeheartedly, without a single misstep. A whole series of plans are dependent on how this case plays out; its effect is critical. Remember that."

You Miao nodded in understanding and the conversation ended there. As You Miao crossed through the courtyard holding official documents from the Ministry of War, You Miao spotted Tang Bo standing in the yard feeding fish.

"Lord You," Tang Bo greeted with a light smile.

You Miao stopped and smiled back. "Lord Tang."

"Going off to look for General Li? I saw him leaving this morning. I wish him success," Tang Bo said.

“Yes. I thank Lord Tang on Li Zhifeng’s behalf.” You Miao flashed a smile and continued on his way. As soon as he turned to leave, his face dropped and he mentally cursed, *Motherfucker* .

This new round of confrontations had only just begun; instead of showing his own face, Tang Bo had secretly instructed the Censor-in-Chief to impeach Li Zhifeng. The only saving grace was that You Miao was faster in reacting than Tang Bo and played with a heavy hand as soon as he returned, delivering a false imperial edict to carry out the reform to seize not only the Tang family’s fields, but also the benefits of an immense number of the gentry. Truly, the barefooted do not fear those who wear shoes.

Now, everything depended on Sun Yu and Zhao Chao’s capabilities. You Miao had a feeling that he’d raised a hell of a storm this time. Had he agreed to Zhao Chao’s arrangement and took the Xie family’s daughter’s hand in marriage, it would’ve been much easier to stand his ground at court; there would’ve been no obstacles in enacting the reform.

You Miao did a quick inventory. The only ones in his camp right now were the gentry from the north, but this group didn’t make up more than a third of the court. Aside from Ping Xi, Lin Luoyang, and several others he befriended in his youth, the rest were all those who received the salary but not the power. The Jiangnan gentry were actually the ones who had guarded the critical roles within the six ministries. There was Sun Yu, though — as long as he supported him, several old ministers could be taken care of. And then there was of course the biggest landlord around, Zhao Chao.

Maybe he still had some odds at success… You Miao arrived at the barracks with a heart laden with worries, but the moment he entered the camp, he saw Li Zhifeng lying there on a haystack drinking without a care in the world.

“General Huwei! What do you think you’re doing?!”

You Miao was *so* exasperated. He’d been working himself half to death, yet here Li Zhifeng was, having the time of his life. Li Zhifeng

hopped down from the haystack and smiled at the sight of You Miao—it was a wide smile, handsome and bright like the sun.

"Done with work?" he asked.

You Miao gave up. "Are you really that free?"

Li Zhifeng flashed a light smile and picked You Miao up. "Come."

He leapt onto the haystack with You Miao in his arms and lay him on the top, then he lay himself down as well. The pair watched the sky. The beautiful autumn sun hung high above, shinning down on them, but it wasn't hot — the breeze was cool, and the sky was so blue it was as though it had been washed clean with water.

"What a beautiful sight," You Miao couldn't help but praise.

"Mn," answered Li Zhifeng, who was spacing out watching the sky.

"That cloud looks like a dog," You Miao said with a laugh.

"And behind it is a herd of sheep," Li Zhifeng said.

They were quiet for a bit, then Li Zhifeng said, "This is how it's like in the northlands. The nomads keep many sheep and have a few shepherd dogs to watch the herds."

"Mn. My mom once told me a story about life beyond the border," You Miao said. "She heard it from the merchants who came from the north."

You Miao then began to tell Li Zhifeng said story: a story about a shepherd dog, a wolf, sheep, and a nomad.

The nomad kept a dog and a herd of sheep. One day, a lamb was lost, so the dog went to search for it. Upon its return, however, it discovered that a wolf had come and left with another sheep in its mouth. The dog's master thought it was the dog who had lost itself in play and forgot its duty, so the master gave it a beating. The herd of sheep also hated the dog for the

lost lambs, so they found a way to stomp on its leg until they had crippled it. From that day forward, the dog limped.

One day, the dog took the herd out to graze, but it was thrown off the path by the sheep. It searched for the way home all night in the mountain by itself. Meanwhile, that same night, when the herd returned to their pen, the wolf came…

You Miao stopped there, and instead of continuing the story, he asked, "Oh yeah, what did the soldiers under your command do? So many complaints got lodged to san-ge."

Li Zhifeng was still immersed in You Miao's story, seemingly pensive, so he was thrown off when that question jumped out so suddenly. He turned to You Miao. "Nothing. What happened?"

"They said the people under you trampled the rice paddy fields during maneuvers," You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng creased his brows, and You Miao moved himself down the haystack. He said, going into the military affairs tent, "Let's talk business."

Li Zhifeng summoned every single one of the commanders under him into the tent, and You Miao interrogated them on the details that were listed in the complaint—details that he never told Li Zhifeng.

And with every line of questioning, Li Zhifeng's expression grew darker.

Sure enough, the trampling of the fields did happen. *However,* due to the drought, the grounds were cracked with no harvest to speak of. The captain of a unit had crossed it directly as a shortcut, thinking it to be harmless. The private brawls were also true, but it was only some drunk soldiers fighting in the streets of Yang Prefectural City. As for the plundering, it *technically* happened as well — a soldier named A-Lang from one of the squadrons went home for a visit in the middle of the seventh month, and found a house in his village had crossed its boundaries when building a wall. The youngest son of the offended neighbor to the house in

question happened to be A-Lang's childhood friend, and he asked A-Lang for help, so A-Lang helped by dismantling the entire wall that intruded on his friend's yard.

The sexual harassment case was even more complicated. If they had to be technical, then it couldn't *really* be considered a non-consensual act. A man, prior to his enlistment in the Yang Prefectural Army, was once engaged to his childhood sweetheart without parental consent. Later, because the girl refused to marry another man despite her family's pressure, she committed suicide. Yet the girl's family happened to be avaricious, so they reported the soldier to the authorities, claiming he was the one who made the girl kill herself.

At the end of You Miao's interrogation session, there was a kneeling crowd in front of him. Having listened to it all, Li Zhifeng demanded, "Who made these complaints against me?"

You Miao hadn't bothered to hold a trial, yet Li Zhifeng still managed to guess what was up.

"A bunch of people did," You Miao replied in exasperation. "How will you handle this?"

"What houses are they from? Give me a list of names. I'll go pay a call to every single one of them," Li Zhifeng declared.

"…With a blade?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng's brows were deeply locked, and he didn't respond.

Knowing the guy was splitting hairs again, You Miao consoled, "All right, all right, I've got my ways to deal with them. Just be more careful on your side."

You Miao comforted every single man there, and they were all free of scolding save for the group who'd brawled in Yang Prefectural City, who were given a simple punishment of five flogs each. As for the soldier whose woman had died, You Miao gave him ten silver to properly bury the girl.

After the consolation was over, however, Li Zhifeng was still miffed. You Miao watched him, amused.

Li Zhifeng still wasn't getting it, though. "Why are they targeting us? We're working ourselves to death for Tianqi; everything that we do is for the people, but they're still trying to hinder me, screw with me. What good does it do them?"

"None at all," You Miao replied regretfully.

"Then why are they acting that way?" Li Zhifeng questioned.

"It's why the imperial capital fell so easily," You Miao answered in amusement.

Li Zhifeng's temper deflated. The sight of him only made You Miao endlessly entertained; he was just too funny. Li Zhifeng was clearly older and much steadier in character, yet his heart remained invariable after all these years — still as pure as a child's no matter what he went through.

He went over and pecked Li Zhifeng on the lips. "This is what the political arena is like; it goes up and down, everything's hard to gauge. The one who laughs last is the winner. Look at my teacher; he was chosen at the exams at the age of sixteen, entered the Hanlin Academy at twenty-three, got implicated in the state exam cheating case at twenty-five and banished to Yang Prefecture, returned to the capital at thirty-three after the cheating case was redressed, climbed to the Senior Supervisory Censor position and became the Political Advisor at forty, reaching as high as the crown prince's Grand Tutor. Then at forty-eight, he was stripped of his position and banished to Liu Prefecture to take on a hollow position. And now, he's seventy-one."

Li Zhifeng shook his head, confused and unable to understand. In the end, he still nodded.

At this point, You Miao didn't dare to mention anything about Zhao Chao arranging marriages; he had shut the whole affair down anyhow. If he had told Li Zhifeng about it now, he would probably rush the palace brandishing his blade. This guy could do anything.

“There’s this as well.” You Miao dug out the assignment papers from the Ministry of War and handed them to Li Zhifeng. “They want you to go exterminate bandits.”

Li Zhifeng gave the papers a nonchalant skim and nodded. “Got it.”

“It’s fighting against ordinary people; it’ll be really tough,” You Miao pressed.

Li Zhifeng glanced at him, and You Miao said, “They’re Hans. If you kill them as if they’re Barbarians, it can’t be justified, nor would you have the heart to. If you spare them, though, they might not be merciful in battle and you’d end up injuring your own men. This is tough business. Think thrice before you act. Making them surrender is the priority. Remember not to slaughter needlessly.”

Li Zhifeng nodded.

The two fell silent as they stared at each other. A moment later, You Miao started to laugh. Confused, Li Zhifeng arched his eyebrows, questioning with his eyes. You Miao shook his head in response, so Li Zhifeng extended a hand to him, and You Miao went over to let himself be held. They two clung to each other, never speaking all the while. It wasn’t until evening, when it was time to light the lamps, and when the military tally had arrived from the Ministry of War, that Li Zhifeng left to assemble the troops, allocate the food provisions, do roll call, and issue commands.

On the surface, You Miao appeared perfectly confident. But inwardly, he was really worried about this expedition. What they were afraid of right now was a peasant uprising, and whatever one was scared of always came to pass. Once the court started crackdowns, the people of Jiao Prefecture and southern Yang Prefecture might just rise up too. He was slowly coming to understand why Sun Yu had said that this expedition was so critical.

In order to quell the southern bandits, pressure at court must be applied simultaneously to all the various prominent clans of the local region. While Li Zhifeng fought the rogues, You Miao had to crush

objections and push the new law through. Coupled with Zhao Chao's fast and furious methods, perhaps they would be able to pass the most brutal reform of the past century.

Li Zhifeng set out three days later and was personally sent off by Zhao Chao. The two exchanged a few words, while You Miao exhorted the newly assigned army supervisor, Xie Quan. Xie Quan was someone Ping Xi had especially assigned; he had a good sense of propriety and knew how to mediate situations. Furthermore, in order to appease the local gentry affected by the unrest, they needed a junior from one of the Jiangnan's clans to talk to them.

Worried nonetheless, You Miao tugged on Xie Quan's hand and said, "Lord Xie, this matter is in your hands."

Xie Quan knew the weight of things, and nodded. "Rest assured, You-xiong. I will of course do my utmost."

You Miao then instructed for the money to be brought over. "If they need grain over there, then stuff a note in the military reports and send it over. I'll think of a way."

Xie Quan nodded a few more times before You Miao finally released him.

Li Zhifeng was about to go to battle, so plenty of well-wishing words of success were said between the ruler and the subject — though no one felt any sense of great heroism or lofty passion. Many Hans would die by the hands of their own people on this expedition. But who was to blame? No one.

At the morning assembly on the second day after Li Zhifeng's departure, You Miao eloquently and voluminously put together a memorial to the throne of twenty thousand words and finally launched his attack.

Sun Yu called in sick and was absent from court today, so You Miao stood in the hall by himself—the entire morning assembly was now his battlefield. He came prepared, but so did many of the civil officials, and in the blink of an eye, all was set for a showdown.

The Tangs, the Xies, and the Lins were major houses of Jiangnan, and they took up two-thirds of the court. The first one to speak was Tang Xin. Tang Xin was Tang Bo's distant older cousin, and although they belonged to the same generation, he was already over forty in age. He countered as soon as he heard You Miao's proposal.

"Didn't we discuss this matter at the beginning of the year? All that needed to be said was already said, so why is the Administration Chamber bringing up retired issues now?"

"The circumstances have changed," You Miao replied. "Before the new year, we didn't know Jiangnan would have a great drought."

"But it was determined at last year's end that the reform is unfeasible," Tang Xin argued, "and it remains so now. The south is about to enter Autumn, the people of Jiang Prefecture are nervous. Taxes were just paid in the fifth month, dividing the fields now will likely dishearten many of the landed gentry. Your Majesty, please consider carefully."

Tang Xin's position was the Minister of Public Works, the department under which the measuring of fields, irrigation route construction, and redivision of land all fell. The moment he opposed the reform, the rest of the officials sounded their agreement with him.

Nodding, the Supervisory Censor Lin Zhengtao said, "Your Majesty, the popular support and the pros and cons are obvious at a glance. The government has already sent the army to subdue the disturbance, and it will only be a matter of days before the unrest in Jiang Prefecture is quelled. All we need to do is to wait for spring next year and everything will resolve on its own."

You Miao answered, "Yes, Li Zhifeng's army has been dispatched, but this matter concerns people's livelihoods, which mere force cannot quell. My lords, last year was a great flood and this year was a great drought. If we have another disaster next year, how should we respond? Now is the most critical time; Tianqi hasn't completely settled from the southward migration, there are millions of refugees, and since last year, the

number of those who have fled south without any land to farm has climbed to over seven hundred thousand…"

"That's precisely why we must ask for stability right now," Tang Xin argued. "Political Advisor Sun considered this problem three months ago: where is the foundation of the present Tianqi—"

"In the people." You Miao didn't wait for Tang Xin to finish before cutting him off.

Tang Xin appeared furious, and he said coldly, "Indeed, it's in the people. Even without the redivision of the fields, the power of the southern gentry is perfectly capable of absorbing the millions of refugees in the next three to five years and rebuilding employment as well as production. Your impulse to remeasure all the land from the capital to the regional governments requires enormous funding, as well as upwards of millions in manpower and resources. Why not wait for spring and let the regional governments take care of it?"

"Regional governments; do you honestly think *they* can handle it?" You Miao rebuffed bluntly. "This year's disaster aid is the perfect example. His Majesty ordered the requisition of two hundred thousand bushels of grain in the seventh month. It is now nearly the tenth month, and the grain collected hasn't even reached one hundred thousand bushels. If we don't change the law now, there will be hundreds of thousands of people dying of famine in Yang, Jiang, and Liu Prefectures!"

Lin Zhengtao sneered. "I don't know how Lord You arrived at this calculation; do you think after the land is reallocated that there are suddenly going to be new crops sprouting in the fields that can enter the stores to supply food and drink? Won't those hundreds of thousands still have to wait for spring before they can fill their stomachs?"

"Of course the fields won't be able to grow anything immediately," You Miao said, "but it does immediately provide the people with peace of mind. All that the refugees ask for is farmable land, a bite to eat. Once the reform is announced, the unrest everywhere will cease on its own. And if the government can distribute financial relief…"

Tang Xin said, “Lord You, on the one hand, you want to divide and distribute the gentry’s land, and on the other, to tell them to open up their stores to relieve disaster. It’s a veritably good idea; we’ll thank you to go persuade them yourself when the time comes.”

You Miao cursed under his breath. Those two old things certainly were crafty and cunning; no one in Tang Bo’s generation in the Administration Chamber could compare. He himself was only a young man of over twenty; he really didn’t have enough weight to throw around in the imperial court.

Unsure of how to intercept the debate for the moment, Zhao Chao turned his gaze to the Minister of Revenue, Xie Hui. Xie Hui never spoke up to agree with Tang Xin and Lin Zhengtao, and even now, he was quiet and stood deep in contemplation. He looked up nervously to meet Zhao Chao’s eyes.

“Disaster aid would require an enormous sum.”

Those were Xie Hui’s first words, and everyone fell silent.

“The imperial government alone cannot allocate the funds to save the lives of seven hundred thousand people,” Xie Hui said unhurriedly. “This subject believes that the Administration Chamber is right in reason and their claims are backed by evidence. However, pray Your Majesty not forget that opening stores for relief aid is a cost that will fall on the shoulders of the Jiangnan gentry.”

After giving this statement, Xie Hui didn’t say any more.

Li Yan took a step forward. “Lord Ministers, Lord Supervisory Censor, when the Hanlin Academy drafted the new law for His Majesty, it was not with the intention of implementing it permanently. If the reform suffers obstruction, why not limit its implementation to two years and focus on overcoming the current emergency before drafting another statute?”

Li Yan had presented a compromise, yet no one sounded their agreement. After all, they all knew that once the gentry’s land was divided,

anything taken away would never be returned no matter how many years passed. How could they take back what they gave away?

Tang Xin stuck to his point. “Your Majesty, if disaster aid didn’t require the locals to open their stores, then this subject would naturally have nothing to say; however, it would only add to the current unrest. If the reform is enacted but the unrest still cannot be stopped, then the subsequent situation would be quite worrisome.”

“Why wouldn’t it be stopped?” You Miao demanded. “Li Zhifeng has already deployed troops along the border of Jiang Prefecture. As soon as His Majesty’s imperial edict reaches him, the entire prefecture will be reclaimed.”

Lin Zhengtao snorted. “General Li’s soldiers do well fighting the Barbarians. I wonder if he’ll be equally hard-handed when pitted against the people.”

“Why doesn’t everyone just sit back and see how Li Zhifeng will handle this? As the ancients say, don’t pass judgment until the coffin has been nailed. General Li hasn’t even sacrificed his life for the country yet, so isn’t it a little early to form conclusions?” You Miao replied drily.

Lin Zhengtao chuckled. “Lord You, you blocked his indictment by relying on thick skin and a good teacher. And now you’re talking big again.”

He took a step forward, refusing to concede a single bit. “Your Majesty, Li Zhifeng was charged with misconduct, yet he was still dispatched to end the unrest. On what grounds was the decision based? Has Your Majesty granted an imperial pardon? Or does Your Majesty believe the twelve memorials from the Ministry of Justice, the Supreme Court, and the Yang Prefectural Government are causing problems with baseless rumors? If General Huwei was pardoned, there must be a statement. If Your Majesty believes his accusations were false charges, then an investigation must be conducted immediately to capture the ones spreading the rumors and to discuss punishment. General Huwei being dispatched before the conclusion of his case is a blatant disregard for the imperial government.”

Ping Xi spoke up. “Lord Lin, the unrest across the regions cannot wait, but you want to throw Li Zhifeng in jail for interrogation? For who knows how long? General Nie is still defending the frontlines; who else can the government send out to battle? Does Lord Lin want to go, perhaps?”

“That’s the Ministry of War’s problem, what does that have to do with the censorate?” Lin Zhengtao spat angrily. “Is the Ministry of War not reflecting on their own shortcomings when there are no available candidates for a commander—”

“ *Enough* !” Zhao Chao angrily shouted.

Looks like each and every one of you is determined to drag this on with me. Well then, let’s all just keep wasting our breath until nightfall. If no one concedes, then no one goes home, You Miao thought. Then he questioned the room, “What suggestions or concerns do my lords have in regards to the reform?”

Tang Xin scoffed. “All that needs to be said was already said clearly three months ago. Saying it again now is nothing more than a waste of breath.”

Lin Zhengtao added, “If the Administration is set on carrying out the reform, at least take into consideration the people’s opinions. Otherwise, trouble will start before change even happens.”

“The people’s opinions?” You Miao demanded. “Of the seven hundred thousand homeless refugees, five hundred thousand are northerners who fled south and two hundred thousand are local tenant households. If their opinions don’t count as ‘the people’s opinions,’ then whose does?”

Tang Xin sneered. “Of course Political Advisor Sun and Lord You understand the people’s opinions best.”

He gave a quick cup of his hands in a salute to You Miao, appearing like he was being the bigger person and disdained to argue further with him.

The Vice Minister of Public Works spoke up. “Your Majesty, this matter requires time and affects everything. The enactment of this reform

would require at least three years' time; distant water cannot extinguish nearby fires. Not to mention the current situation is subject to rapid changes. The people's livelihoods and the frontlines are deeply connected to the results of the war in the Central Plains, and anything can happen in a day. Pray Your Majesty tread carefully and not stir chaos lightly."

Lin Zhengtao added, "Your Majesty, stability should be the utmost priority right now. Too much is implicated in the new law, now really is not the time to carry it out."

After some contemplation, Xie Hui spoke again, "Why not wait until spring next year and see what the situation is like then? What do my lords think of this? When spring comes, the land will need to be worked and the crop seeds will need to be distributed—all of that requires labor. Perhaps time will solve all problems on its own."

You Miao's brows were deeply knitted, but just when he was about to rebuke the idea, Zhao Chao shot him a look, signaling that he should stop at this point.

The debate battle at the morning assembly lasted for six hours; it was past noon and many officials were already at the end of their endurance. However, You Miao shook his head slowly, thinking it wasn't enough yet. Sure, if Zhao Chao had said *"Our mind is made up, there is no need to say more,"* then the officials could be subdued and the law would be changed on his will alone. But that wasn't what the Tangs, Lins, and Xies wanted. They were representatives of the major clans at court, and if they didn't nod, then the Jiangnan gentry would definitely not consent. Forcibly pushing through the new law would cause resentment among the locals and they would invariably plan for even more hurdles in the future. The only way for the reform to work was if the officials at court were all forced to nod.

"We will discuss this matter another time," Zhao Chao said at last. "We will see what the war situation is like when General Li returns from his mission. Assembly dismissed."

The ministers all sighed a breath of relief. They had stood for a whole six hours, each so tired that they were on the verge of collapse. The moment Zhao Chao left the room, the officials dispersed.

You Miao was flaming with fury, and as Li Yan came hurrying to him from behind, he spat, “Fuck, I’m so mad.”

Li Yan had no idea what to do, either. “I can’t say anything to help you.”

You Miao nodded. “I know.”

He didn’t blame anyone for him having to fight the battle alone. After all, this was something not even Sun Yu knew how to solve—all six ministers of the six ministries were present at court today, but no one was in a position to help him. Lin Luoyang managed the Ministry of Personnel and Ping Xi managed the Ministry of War, but neither of the two had any right to speak on the new reform. Although Qin Shaonan was in the Ministry of Revenue, Xie Hui’s position was above him, so he couldn’t speak over his superior. As for Li Yan, he was in a marriage alliance with the Tang family. Moreover, the Hanlin Academy only handled drafts, not the final decisions on new statutes nor the right to question any decisions.

With that, only You Miao was left. At first, he had thought the northerner’s faction had taken a good half of the six ministries. But when things got real, the ministries that mattered—the Ministry of Public Works and the Ministry of Revenue—were held down by the Jiangnan gentry. The censorate was in the Lin family’s hands, too. What a headache.

Lin Luoyang consoled him, “Don’t get so worked up. Go back and rest.”

You Miao nodded. He didn’t eat breakfast and was already feeling weak, so the plan was to hurry back to the Administration Chamber for a bite to eat. However, just as the group was still talking, a retainer from the Xie family came to beckon him from outside Wumen Gate.

“Lord You, our Lord Minister wishes to come and speak with you,” the retainer said.

Something clicked in You Miao's head, and everyone bore a look of understanding on their faces. You Miao knew Xie Hui wanted to come to him because of his close relationship with Zhao Chao, so it was only proper etiquette. However, regarding official rank, You Miao was only a supervisory secretary of the sixth rank—far below Xie Hui, who was a proper minister of the second rank. You Miao should be the one to go over, as was proper.

You Miao quickly said, "I'll go over this instant."

He ended the discussion between Li Yan and the others and came outside the palace on his own. After he mounted Xie Hui's carriage, he cupped his hands in greetings first.

"Lord Xie."

Xie Hui was indeed inside the car. Languid in his old age, a smile appeared in his eyes when he saw You Miao, and he nodded.

You Miao's status at court was very sensitive, and although his rank was low, no one dared to snub him. After all, the structure of the new government was pretty much determined—when it came to the military, Nie Dan defended the outside, Li Zhifeng guarded the inside, and You Miao was the representative of the two major army factions at court. Not to mention two of the six ministers of the six ministries were friendly with him, and never mind that fact that he was enormously favored by the emperor. To top it all off, the Administration Chamber was Sun Yu's territory, and no one knew for certain whether this young man would become a grand official of the first rank in the future. This was why no one dared to offend him head-on.

Sounding deeply concerned, Xie Hui asked, "How is Political Advisor Sun?"

You Miao was taken aback at first by his question, but then he quickly realized Xie Hui was talking about Sun Yu calling in sick. He smiled in response and said, "Teacher is only overworked. He will be fine after a few days' rest."

Xie Hui nodded. “With your assistance, I’m sure Lord Political Advisor will recover in a few days.”

You Miao sighed. “This student is incompetent; I’m incapable of helping my teacher shoulder his worries.”

“The new law involves too many things, it’s not something to be rushed. Pace yourself,” Xie Hui advised, to which You Miao gave a “mn” in response.

The carriage had started to roll forward, traversing through the main streets of Maocheng. Xie Hui had to have something he wanted to discuss, since he’d called him over; You Miao just didn’t know what. It was likely about the marriage, in which case he would have to figure out a way to beg it off.

However, Xie Hui said, “I’ll be honest, Lord You. The reason I invited you is because I have honestly come to the end of my rope, and no one else can help me. Pray Lord You consider that I’m but old bones and lend me a hand.”

“Please do tell, Lord Minister,” You Miao quickly replied.

“My cousin has a disappointing son named Xie Puran,” Xie Hui started. “A while ago, he was charged by the Yi Prefectural Department due to the matter of canal construction…”

You Miao was confused. He didn’t recall anyone by the name of Xie Puran. “The Ministry of Justice should be the one handling this case.”

“The Ministry of Justice didn’t come to a verdict and instead passed the case to the Administration Chamber for His Majesty to respond,” Xie Hui explained. “Later, I heard it was directly processed by the Administration Chamber. The little brat grew up in my house and didn’t receive strict discipline when he was little. And now the old must send off the young…”

You Miao remembered now. Wasn’t that the very first memorial to the throne he had processed when he first joined the Administration

Chamber, and had marked it with *"execute come autumn"* ?! Now that he thought about it, that would be around this time.

He nodded. "I remember now. There was indeed such a case."

Xie Hui begged, "Will Lord You consider that he is the only son to his father, who is sixty, and say a few nice words for him in front of His Majesty? If he could be saved and drafted into the army, the Xie family will be most grateful."

You Miao was a little hesitant. "Sure…I will try, Lord Xie."

Xie Hui's expression relaxed, as if from relief. You Miao's mind quickly spun; Zhao Chao mentioned the other day that Xie Hui had helped speak for Li Zhifeng at court. He figured it was a give and take and knew Zhao Chao wouldn't actually sentence Li Zhifeng, so he might as well profit from empty goodwill and use it to ask for the life of the Xie nephew. A pretty sweet deal.

And it wouldn't be that hard for You Miao to handle this case, either. The Administration Chamber's supervisory secretaries possessed the great power of "countering policy" and could refute every edict issued by the Son of Heaven. All he had to do was tag a "Detain for further interrogation" over the "Execute come autumn" and pass the case back to the Ministry of Justice. If he took care of this, Xie Hui likely wouldn't treat him poorly in return, so You Miao agreed.

The two discussed a few more subjects on the road, all of which surrounded the new law. You Miao attempted to rope Xie Hui to his side, but after dancing around in circles, Xie Hui was still unwilling to make his stance known.

Old fox. Refusing to stand with any of the teams, huh, offending nobody. Whatever, whatever , You Miao thought.

By the time You Miao returned to the Administration Chamber, lunch was already cleared away. Staring at the empty rice buckets, he was filled with rage. Mu Feng was going to go out to buy him food, but You Miao was past the point of hunger and couldn't stomach much, so he told

the kitchen make him some light congee. However, he'd only just stepped foot into the Administration Chamber when Zhao Chao's men arrived with food, proclaiming that the palace had granted him lunch. This made You Miao feel better, and he sat down to dig in.

Sun Yu came in just as he was eating, having woken from his afternoon nap.

"Keep eating." Sun Yu gestured. You Miao nodded, and Sun Yu asked, "His Majesty didn't keep you at the palace?"

"No. Probably because he figures I'll want to come back and talk with you first, sir," You Miao replied.

Sun Yu grunted, and You Miao gave him a detailed account of everything that had transpired at the morning assembly. Stroking his beard, Sun Yu did not say a word—even he was out of ideas this time.

A long while after, when You Miao finally finished the Eight Treasure Duck [27]-that Zhao Chao had granted him, Sun Yu finally asked, "Any thoughts on the matter?"

"Ugh, no wonder everyone wants to get rid of their adversaries. Pardon me for being honest, sir, but if it were me, I'd love to banish everyone that disagreed with me too," You Miao said.

"Is that what I was asking?!" Sun Yu was furious.

You Miao stuck out his tongue and Sun Yu's anger deflated, feeling exasperated.

Another tangent came to Sun Yu's mind after a moment, and he said, "In many matters, the ministers aren't fighting you purely for their own sakes. This is something you have to recognize."

"Mn." You Miao nodded.

Sun Yu added, "I had known this back when the Li family had control over the government."

You Miao nodded again, listening to the lecture. The Li family might be affluent, but not everything Chancellor Li had done in the past was an abuse of his authority for personal gain. It was about half and half: half for the country, half for himself. The clash between Chancellor Li and Sun Yu stemmed from nothing more than a difference in political views. It was no wonder that throughout all these years, whenever Sun Yu mentioned the Li family, there was lament but no resentment or disdain.

"Since coming to a decision is hard, see to it yourself," Sun Yu said.

You Miao's head was throbbing again. His current status didn't allow him to take on such a huge responsibility yet, but Sun Yu got up and left after he had had his say. The Administration Chamber was already in session when You Miao finished his lunch, so he had to return to work through the memorials without taking a nap.

Not forgetting Xie Hui's request, You Miao rummaged through his pile and found the backup copy of the memorial that said *"Execute come autumn"* for Xie Puran. He opened it up and added a *"Detain for further interrogation,"* stuffed a note in it for Lin Luoyang, who was now the Minister of Justice, and went outside the hall to have Mu Feng deliver the memorial to the Ministry of Justice.

When You Miao went back inside and sat back down, the supervisory secretaries were all watching him with schadenfreude evident in their eyes. They were probably all aware that You Miao had hit a hidden snag at the morning assembly today, and that the new law was still sitting at an impasse.

You Miao didn't talk the entire afternoon as the reform was the only thing on his mind. A report was sent in from the Ministry of War informing them that Li Zhifeng had arrived at the frontlines, and provided an overview on the rebel army and their leader, the Yellow-Robed General. Per You Miao's instructions, Li Zhifeng had to wait for direction from the imperial court for his next course of action, whether it be battle or negotiations.

Holding the report, You Miao thought to send a message to Xie Quan to have him attempt to negotiate with the rebel army first. The matter with the reform still hadn't been settled, though. Honestly, what a headache — but every day wasted with Li Zhifeng and his army of two hundred thousand at the frontlines was a day of food provisions wasted…

[END VOLUME 3]

Glossary

Name Guide

When addressing another person in Chinese, it is the polite convention to refer to them by their title or position rather than their name, especially if the person is in a station above you. Likewise, to convey humility, one would refer to oneself as one's position or a vague, lower-status entity. The direct addresses of "you," "I," or "me" are considered to be vulgar, or imply a more familiar relationship.

Diminutives, Nicknames, Nametags

General

- **Da-:** "Big." Always a prefix.
- **-Er:** "Son" or "Child." Always a suffix. An affectionate address from an elder, or used as a familiar diminutive for those of lower status.
- **Lao-:** "Old." Always a prefix. Used for familiar elders, family, or close friends.
- **Xiao-:** "Little." Always a prefix.
- **-Zi:** Same as -Er.

Family

- **Shu(shu):** Younger paternal uncle. Can be used to address familiar elders.
- **Da-ge:** Oldest brother, or a casual familiar address for an older male friend.
- **Di(di):** Familiar address for younger brother or a younger male friend.

- **Ge(ge):** Familiar address for older brother or an older male friend.
- **Jie(jie):** Familiar address for an older sister or an older female friend.
- Jiu(jiu): Maternal uncle.
- **Jiuma:** Maternal uncle's wife.
- **Sao(zi):** Sister-in-law, the wife of your older brother or familiar older male friend of the same generation.
- **Xiandi:** "Wise/worthy younger brother." Formal term of respect for a younger brother or a younger male friend.
- **Xiao-di:** Casual familiar address for a younger brother or a younger male friend. Can also mean "lackey" depending on context.
- **Xiao-jiu:** "Little (maternal) uncle." Affectionate.
- **Xiong:** Elder brother, or a familiar address for a male friend.
- **Xiongdi:** Generic word for "Brother." Can refer to both family or friends.
- **Yudi** : "Foolish little brother." Formal self-diminutive for a younger brother or a younger male friend addressing the older.
- **Yuxiong:** "Foolish older brother." Formal self-diminutive for an older brother or an older male friend addressing the younger.

When there is more than one family member in the same generation, they are assigned a number according to their birth, and addressed as such rather than by direct names. The eldest is given "Da," then "-Er" for second-oldest, and so on.

Example: Ping Xi is the second son in his family, so he is nicknamed Ping-Er. Qiao Jue calls Qiao Ke-er "san-jie" or "third sis" because she is the third child.

1: Da
2: Er
3: San
4: Si
5: Wu
Oldest: Lao-da
Youngest: Lao-yao

Titles

- **Gongzi:** Young Master or Gentleman. A broad term of respect for the son of a noble or affluent birth.
- **Laoye:** Master or Lord; the master of a house or a lord official/officer.
- **Shaoye:** Young Master or Young Lord. A term of respect used by those in service of the house.

Barbarians: Ethnic groups outside the border of China, and specifically in this text, the nomadic tribes north of the Great Wall of China. The specific tribes that encroach on the northern Chinese border vary by period.

Beyond the Border/Wall: Refers to the land beyond the Great Wall of China. The Great Wall is a massive, extensive bulwark that stretches across northern China and southern Mongolia. Traditionally built for defense against the peoples north of the Chinese border, the wall consists of multiple "passes" that are major strongholds in strategic points of the wall for both defense and international trade.

Capital Army : The army stationed outside the capital city that defends it and its surrounding areas.

Central Plains: Also known as the "Middle Kingdom" or "Midland," it is the part of the North China Plain that surrounds the

lower and middle reaches of the Yellow River. It is where the Han ethnicity was conceived and believed to be the center of the world. It has been the political, economic, and cultural center of Chinese civilization for a large part of Chinese history.

Due Diligence Army: When the monarch is in trouble, the Order of Due Diligence is issued to all officials within the kingdom and those who have sworn allegiance to the country to rise and protect the throne. Their assembled army is the Due Diligence Army.

Holidays:

- **New Year:** The most important holiday on the calendar, and marks the start of a new year. An important time for family gatherings and wrapping up business from the previous year.
- **Shangyuan/Lantern Festival/Yuanxiao:** Shangyuan Festival, also known as Yuanxiao, is the Lantern Festival. It is held on the first full moon of the new year, marking the end of Lunar New Year.

Imperial Army: The army stationed inside the capital city that oversees its security and interior defense.

Imperial State Exam: A civil service examination system for selecting candidates for state bureaucracy. Civil Service and Scholarship reward the highest prestige for a citizen regardless of background.

Memorial to the Throne: A carefully crafted essay presenting an issue to communicate to the emperor. Depending on the circumstances, it is sometimes also directed to certain officials.

Political Advisor: A position established in the Song Dynasty. It started as a role akin to Deputy Chancellor and later evolved to one that is equal to a Chancellor.

Red Pocket/Envelope: A monetary gift. Red is the color for joyous occasions.

Tanghulu: Candied fruit skewers. The fruit is traditionally Chinese hawberry, but it can be other fruits such as strawberries.

Vassal King : The ruler and lord of a territory conferred by the emperor, to whom they owe allegiance. The title given to vassal kings is "Prince." Vassal Kings are often imperial princes who will not succeed the throne, and military aristocrats.

Government

The structure of government is simplified in this work.

Emperor→ Censorate
→ **Hanlin Academy**
→ **Administration Chamber** → **Six Ministries**

Administration Chamber: The administrative body that assists the Emperor in facilitating and streamlining government affairs. They also provide counsel and advice. A staff member at the Administration Chamber has the title **Supervisory Secretary** .

Censorate : The independent department that supervises officialdom. It is the second highest office after the Chancellor. The censors report directly to the emperor.

Directorate of Education: The department of education that determined the subjects and standards of studies on a national level, and was the largest library and publisher of various writings. The Imperial College was the school under this agency, though it was only for monarchs and the children of high officials, to groom them for court. In certain dynasties, the Directorate of Education and the Imperial College were a single entity.

Hanlin Academy: An institution whose members are the elite literati of the nation. They perform literary and administrative duties for the imperial court, such as drafting initial legislation.

Ministry of Justice : In charge of judicial and penal processes, but has no supervisory role over the Censorate or the Supreme Court.

Ministry of Personnel: In charge of appointments, merit ratings, promotions, demotions, and granting of honorific titles.

Ministry of Revenue : In charge of census data, tax collection, state revenue, and currency management.

Ministry of Rites: In charge of state and religious ceremonies, foreign relations, and the imperial state examination.

Ministry of War : In charge of appointments, promotions and demotions of military officers, maintenance of military installations, equipment and weapons, as well as the courier system. In times of war, the Ministry of War also serves as strategists and advisors to the frontline commanders.

Ministry of Works: In charge of government engineering and construction projects, hiring of artisans and laborers for temporary service, manufacturing government equipment, the maintenance of roads and canals, standardization of weights and measures, and the gathering of resources from territories.

Supreme Court : An agency in charge of reviewing judicial proceedings at all administrative levels, and singling out cases for retrial by court officials or the Emperor himself. Works closely with the Censorate and the Ministry of Justice.

Measurement

This translation uses predominantly the American Imperial System, and at times Metric. The numbers are approximated for ease of reading and are not to be scrutinized.

Currency

The currency used is ingots of gold, silver, and copper coins. They are further weighed to calculate denominations.

1 tael of gold = 30 taels of silver
1 tael of silver = 1000 copper coins
1 mace of silver = 100 copper coins

Broken Silver: Refers to silver pieces that are smaller than one tael and used like loose change, their value dependent on their weight.

One String of Coins: Another way to say 1000 copper coins, as the coins are usually stringed.

Time

Shichen: The day is divided into 12 shichen with roughly 2 hours per shichen.

- Zi [midnight]: 11pm - 1am
- Chou: 1am - 3am
- Yin: 3am - 5am
- Mao [sunrise]: 5am - 7am
- Chen: 7am - 9am
- Si: 9am - 11am
- Wu [noon]: 11am - 1pm

- Wei: 1pm - 3pm
- Shen: 3pm - 5pm
- You [sunset]: 5pm - 7pm
- Xu [dusk]: 7pm - 9pm
- Hai: 9pm - 11pm

Geng: The night after sundown is further divided into five geng, otherwise known as five periods or five watches. At the start of every watch, a Gengfu, or a Night-Watchman, will make a round of the city and strike a wooden plank to signal the time.

- 1 geng: 7pm - 9pm
- 2 geng: 9pm - 11pm
- 3 geng: 11pm - 1am
- 4 geng: 1am - 3am
- 5 geng: 3am - 5am

Incense Time: Incense sticks are made to measure time by a day, an hour, half an hour, and so forth. When referenced in this novel, it means 30 minutes.

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[1] Verses from "For My Nephew" by Han Yu, Tang Dynasty.

[2] Verses from "Caiwei," a poem from Xiaoya of the Book of Songs. The song depicts soldiers' difficult lives and their longing for home.

[3] Verse from "Autumn Wind Song" by Li Bai, Tang Dynasty.

[4] Gou Jian was the King of Yue during the Spring and Autumn Period (496 BC) and was enslaved by the King of Wu after Wu conquered Yue. For three years, Gou Jian served the King of Wu, appearing wholly subordinate while he secretly planned for Yue's comeback. Worried that he might become complacent with a life of peace and luxury, Gou Jian slept on bundles of brushwood and hung bitter gall in his room to taste it every night in order to remember his humiliation. The story later became an idiom meaning to maintain one's resolve for revenge under adversity.

[5]-A verse from “Groping for Fish - Song of the Geese Hill” by Yuan Haowen, Jin Dynasty. It is the sister piece to the poem from Arc 1. Geese Hill is a classic love poem, famous for its first line: “I ask this world: What is love on earth?”

[6]-“ Summoning of the Soul” by Song Yu (also disputed to be by Qu Yuan) is a four-part poem within the anthology *Chu Ci* . The anthology was compiled during the Warring States Era. By emulating the traditional shaman ritualistic chants, the poet is lamenting the broken state of his country and begging for the soul of the dead king of Chu to return.

[7]-“Sending Thoughts to the North on a Rainy Night” by Li Shangyin, Tang Dynasty. The poet is writing to his faraway wife (or a friend), telling her (or him) of his longing and anticipation of being able to see and talk to her once more.

[8]-“Sighting of Spring” by Du Fu, Tang Dynasty. The poem described the fall of Chang’an, the imperial capital during Tang Dynasty. It is rife with thoughts of family as well as state affairs.

[9]-A tally is a commander’s proof of authority. Usually consisting of two parts, it could be made of bamboo, wood, metal, or jade. It is used to approve troop movements, among other purposes.

[10]-General Yamen [牙門將軍] is a prestigious military title given to the commander of the internal army. The position is in charge of defense structure works/fortification. Not to be confused with 牙門將, which refers to the captain of a regiment of a thousand men, and the carrier of the army flag.

[11]-Yamen [牙門] is the entrance to the military camp, where the army’s flag is flown. It serves as a demonstration of the commanding general’s prowess. This is also where the commanding general conducted backend administrative duties. Civil officials later took this term and called their local government offices 衙門 [Yamen, same pronunciation]. Here, You Miao is complaining about the weak, white-collar title.

[12]-An official in charge of clerical matters under a chief official.

[13]-A verse from “Climbing High” by Du Fu, Tang Dynasty. The poem illustrates the vast emptiness of Yangtze’s landscape followed by the dreary end of the narrator’s life.

[14]-“Lao,” meaning “Old,” is a prefix used as a moniker for familiar elders or close friends. “San” means “Three.” Zhao Chao is the third brother among the four sworn brothers.

[15]-A verse from the poem “Your Collar So Blue” in the “Book of Songs.” It depicts the impatient longing of a lover.

[16]-You Miao is referencing the origin story the term “cut-sleeve.” Emperor Ai of the Han Dynasty was openly homosexual. Once, when he woke from sleep, he discovered that one of his sleeves was pinned beneath his still-slumbering lover. In order not to wake him, Emperor Ai chose instead to cut off said sleeve. The gesture spoke volumes of his feelings for his male lover.

[17]-From *Shiji* [Historical Records]: Lian Po and Lin Xiangru Bibliographies. The verse is from the advice the Zhao King received when the Kingdom of Qin invaded the Kingdom of Han (Warring States Era), and the Han asked Zhao for help.

[18]-From "The Art of War" by Sun Tzu.

[19]-"Sighting of Spring" by Du Fu, Tang Dynasty. The poem described the fall of Chang'an, the imperial capital during Tang Dynasty. It is rife with thoughts of family as well as state affairs.

[20]-Hanlin Academicians are the highest literati in the country. They write policy drafts for the Central Secretariat, among other things.

[21]-A "gua," or a hexagram, is also known as a divinatory trigram from I-Ching. There are 64 gua in total, used for Daoist fortune-telling.

[22]-A quote from Mencius. It means that one thrives in hardship, and perishes when overly-protected and content with the current situation.

[23]-In accordance to the cycle of four seasons, the emperor has four ruling actions: to celebrate, to award, to discipline, and to punish. Thus, passing sentences and dealing punishments normally occurred in the autumn and winter. This concept first emerged in Confucius's "Book of Rites."

[24]-"Golden bowl" is also a slang for a secure and lucrative job.

[25]-An expression meaning the wife must follow the husband no matter the circumstances after marrying into the family.

[26]-In Confucian teachings, there are three ultimate unfilial deeds, and the biggest being breaking the family line. It's a moral sin not to build a family.

[27]-Stuffed duck, a famous Jiangsu dish.